

**Producing Popularity:  
The Success in France of the Comics Series "Astérix le Gaulois"**

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ABSTRACT:

This study examines the rise in popularity of the French comics series "Astérix le Gaulois" through a production-of-culture lens in an effort to uncover how industry evolution and organization, protectionist legislation, marketing, advertising, branding, and consecration by the media worked interdependently to catapult Astérix, the series' protagonist, into stardom by the middle of the 1960s. In so doing, this study forcefully argues that elements *external* to the text itself greatly facilitated, and in some ways determined, the series' quick and dramatic rise in popularity in France by 1966. The predominance of American and Belgian comics into the 1950s and the moral turn towards all things "100 % français" enabled the success of *Pilote*, the French-language, French-themed magazine launched in 1959 and in which "Astérix" first appeared. By the early 1960s, *Pilote's* faithful readership helped make the publication of "Astérix" in album format a resounding success. Simultaneous radio exposure and extensive product merchandising further promoted "Astérix" to a new, vast, and diverse comics market comprised of children and adults alike. Media consecration marked the final step in Astérix's meteoric rise in popularity in France. Institutionalization of the comics series by the national press during the 1960s transformed Astérix into an emblem of national importance, created celebrities out of the series' co-creators, and even helped legitimize *bande dessinée*, or comics, as a French cultural form worthy of "serious" consideration.

Notre histoire, publiée dès le premier numéro de *Pilote*, remporte aussitôt un assez vif succès auprès de nos lecteurs, ce qui nous satisfait d'autant plus que sa publication sous forme d'albums semble également promise à un assez bon succès d'édition, le tirage de chaque nouvel album étant double du tirage de l'album précédent. Et puis, tout à coup, mystérieusement, il se passe quelque chose : le simple succès d'édition se transforme et devient le phénomène Astérix [...].

– René Goscinny, in an address to the Rotary Club of Paris, May 1967<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Reproduced in Caroline Guillot and Olivier Andrieu, *René Goscinny* (Paris: Éditions du Chêne, 2005) 208. Translation: "Our comic series, published in *Pilote* from the first issue, immediately became quite a success among our readers, which pleased us all the more since the series' publication in album format appeared equally poised for success, the print run of each new album being double that of the preceding album. And then, all of a sudden, mysteriously, something happened: the simple success in print underwent a transformation and became the Astérix phenomenon [...]." Unless otherwise indicated, all translations furnished by the author.

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## I INTRODUCTION: "LE PHÉNOMÈNE ASTÉRIX"

### Prologue

When the French film *Astérix et Obélix contre César* opened in France on Wednesday, February 3, 1999, the French box office raked in a whopping \$2.8m in first-day ticket sales.<sup>2</sup> Attendance over the following week topped 2.7m – in a country of only 59m people.<sup>3</sup> The most expensive movie ever produced by a French studio opened on a record-setting 795 screens throughout France.<sup>4</sup> Only *Titanic*, released just one month earlier on 635 screens, beat *Astérix et Obélix contre César* in attendance over the course of its run in France, with 21m tickets sold. According to Unifrance, the French Culture Ministry's promotional arm for French cinema, the box-office success of *Astérix et Obélix contre César* nearly doubled the size of the European audience for French film for the whole of 1999, a welcome development for an industry whose patronage – even among the French – had tanked to a ten-year low the previous year.<sup>5</sup> That Gérard Dépardieu and Roberto Benigni, both cinematic legends in their respective countries, starred in *Astérix et Obélix contre César*, and that the film was jointly financed by German and Italian interests, can only partially explain how a film adaptation of a French comic strip set in Roman times could sell 8.7m tickets.<sup>6</sup> Yet the film accounted for nearly 43% of all tickets sold to French movie-goers during 1999. *Astérix & Obélix: Mission Cléopâtre*, the sequel released in 2002, went on to sell 14.3m tickets, claiming a full 66% share of total tickets sold to French audiences that same year.<sup>7</sup>

For nearly five decades now, Astérix<sup>8</sup> has been big business in France. Since its debut in the magazine *Pilote* in 1959, the French comic strip – or *bande dessinée*, as the "ninth art" is called in France – has sold over 320 million copies on five continents and has been translated into over 100 languages or dialects.<sup>9</sup> To date, the world of "Astérix" encompasses 33 albums,

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<sup>2</sup> Michael Williams, "'Asterix' conquers B.O. Gallic pic grabs 2.8 mil on opening day," *Variety* 5 Feb. 1999.

<sup>3</sup> INSEE, Recensement de la population, Exploitation principale et complémentaire, 1999.

<sup>4</sup> Williams.

<sup>5</sup> "France Builds Its European Film Audience," *Studio Briefing* 6 Oct. 2000, 15 Apr. 2008 <<http://imdb.com/news/sb/2000-10-06#film8>>.

<sup>6</sup> LUMIERE database of the European Audiovisual Observatory, 15 Apr. 2008 <[http://lumiere.obs.coe.int/web/film\\_info/?id=12007](http://lumiere.obs.coe.int/web/film_info/?id=12007)>.

<sup>7</sup> LUMIERE, 15 Apr. 2008 <[http://lumiere.obs.coe.int/web/film\\_info/?id=18690&graphics=on](http://lumiere.obs.coe.int/web/film_info/?id=18690&graphics=on)>.

<sup>8</sup> Within this paper, "Astérix" (in quotes) refers to the comics series, *Astérix* (italicized) to the comic series published in album (book) format, and Astérix to the character.

<sup>9</sup> Bernard de Choisy, Denis Clauteaux, and Marc Jallon, *Le Monde Miroir d'Astérix* (Paris: Les Éditions Albert René, 2005) 34. See also Nicolas Rouvière, *Astérix ou les lumières de la civilisation* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2006) 1.

eight animated cartoons, three live-action films, board games, video games, permanent museum exhibits, and countless products licensed to use the comics' syntactic peculiarity in marketing and advertising, as in the cases of the butter "Beurix," the cheese "Avécremix," or Shell's "Hélix" oil, if not the actual character likenesses themselves.<sup>10</sup> The jewel in the "Astérix" crown is Parc Astérix, located just north of Paris near Disneyland Resort Paris. Completed in 1989, the "Astérix"-themed amusement park played host to more than 1.8m visitors in 2006.<sup>11</sup>

Co-creators René Goscinny and Albert Uderzo claimed that they simply meant to entertain ("se marrer et faire marrer les autres") a growing market of adolescent, French *bande dessinée* fans when they came up with the idea for "Astérix" in 1959.<sup>12</sup> They created the comic series for the first issue of *Pilote*, their new journal devoted to showcasing high-quality *bande dessinée* produced by French and Francophone *scénaristes*, or comics writers, and *dessinateurs*, or illustrators. François Clauteaux, *Pilote*'s future director, had come up with the magazine's name. *Pilote*, meaning "pilot," would "guide" French youth, modeling "des pistes, des voies, des orientations aux jeunes lecteurs"<sup>13</sup> with its original comics series, innovative layouts, and in-depth news articles.<sup>14</sup> Goscinny and Uderzo were tasked with developing a new *bande dessinée* to premiere in the magazine's inaugural issue, scheduled for release at the end of October 1959. By late summer, they still had not hit on a suitable idea for the new strip. They had gathered on the balcony of Uderzo's Bobigny flat in Paris to hash out a plan. Mining the history of France – as they remembered it from the Third Republic textbooks of their youth – looking for inspiration, sipping *pastis*, smoking cigarette after cigarette, sweating in the heat, they went methodically through the major historical periods in chronological order, starting with prehistoric man. When Uderzo reached the Gauls, Goscinny seized on the idea at once. "Nos ancêtres les Gaulois,"<sup>15</sup> a phrase they both recalled from school, would, they assumed, be widely understood by the average French citizen, and it possessed a cultural and mythical *richesse* they could easily exploit to great parodic effect.<sup>16</sup> The series as they conceived it in a matter of minutes would feature a village of "indomitable" Gauls, "des cousins de Vercingétorix," the legendary Gaulish

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<sup>10</sup> Henriette Touillier-Feyrabend, "Bande dessinée et publicité. L'art de récupérer," *Ethnologie française* 1998.3: 367.

<sup>11</sup> "TEA/ERA Theme Park Attendance Report," *Park World* Apr. 2007.

<sup>12</sup> Bernard de Choisy, *Uderzo-storix : L'Aventure d'un Gallo-Romain*, (Paris: J.-C. Lattès, 1991) 144.

<sup>13</sup> Translation: "ways, paths, and orientations to young readers."

<sup>14</sup> de Choisy 129-131.

<sup>15</sup> Translation: "Our ancestors the Gauls."

<sup>16</sup> André Stoll, *Astérix : l'épopée burlesque de la France* (Bruxelles: Éditions complexe : Distribution Presses universitaires de France, 1978) 98.

warrior-hero, holding out against Julius Caesar's invading Roman army in 50 B.C. with the help of a magic potion concocted by the village druid.<sup>17</sup> When the first issue of *Pilote* appeared on stands on October 29, 1959, the world accompanied the strip's hero Astérix and his oafish sidekick Obélix on their very first adventure into dangerous Roman territory.

In the space of months, the series had become a hit with adolescents and adults alike. When French publisher Dargaud, who owned *Pilote*, released the first collection of "Astérix" episodes in album format in 1961, *bande dessinée* fans snatched up 600,000 copies. The second album, *La serpe d'or*, sold 20,000 copies, and the third album, *Astérix et les Goths*, sold 40,000 copies. In 1965, with the publication of *Astérix et Cléopâtre*, the sixth album of the series, "Astérix" had become a bonafide "best-seller."<sup>18</sup> All future albums would have first-edition print runs of at least 1m copies.<sup>19</sup>

From the very first album, Goscinny's narratives and Uderzo's illustrations provided French readers with humorous parodies of contemporary life, despite the story's ancient Roman setting. Yet "Astérix" had to resonate with its target market – roughly one-third of the population under the age of 20 living in France in 1959 – if it were to survive in the competitive *bande dessinée* market of the late 1950s. Aiming for a hit, which both needed, Goscinny and Uderzo crafted situations and gags based on the assumption that there existed a socially constructed, common stock of knowledge pertaining to French culture, society, and history.<sup>20</sup> The resulting series abounded in contemporary cultural references, literary allusions, anachronisms, satire, and caricature. Don Quixote, James Bond, the Beatles, Jacques Lacan, the Statue of Liberty, Louis XIV, William Tell, Zorro, the Moulin Rouge, Napoleon the First, the M1 motorway, Jacques Chirac, and Cole Porter's "I Love Paris in the Springtime" all made appearances in "Astérix," as did textual or visual references to the cultural masterpieces of Fellini, Shakespeare, Pagnol, Rembrandt, Rodin, Géricault, Hugo, and Bruegel.<sup>21</sup> Despite the series' success in translation, France still remains the largest market for "Astérix" today.

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<sup>17</sup> Stoll 142.

<sup>18</sup> Stoll 13.

<sup>19</sup> Stoll 13.

<sup>20</sup> Stoll 134.

<sup>21</sup> See Rouvière's book companion website at <<http://www.mage.fst.uha.fr/asterix/>>, as well as The Asterix Annotations at <<http://asterix.openscroll.org/>>.

## "Astérix" as Culture Produced

Astérix, for decades, has served as the subject of theses, dissertations, symposia, exhibitions, and media commentary and has become a seemingly ubiquitous symbol throughout France and in French discourse. Astérix and friends have graced the covers of countless journals and magazines and appeared in hundreds of endorsements and on as many product labels. Government officials, including heads of state, have even been known to evoke Astérix's name in somber settings. A SOFRES survey carried out in 1983 – well before the media onslaught in anticipation of the first blockbuster movie release – revealed that 86% of the French population already knew who Astérix was.<sup>22</sup> Yet if we return to the comics series itself, still the cash cow of the "Astérix" empire, how might we account for its rise in popularity? Scholars before now have largely explained the "phenomenon" in terms of the series' appeal, or those elements in the text and in the illustrations which, in their opinions, have resonated with readers. Pinet, for example, writing in 1978, contended:

*Astérix le Gaulois* succeeds as a comic series for many reasons. Certainly the imaginative use of the spoken language and the amusing, sometimes hilarious, exploration of myths and stereotypes concerning Frenchmen and their customs and institutions as well as those of other nationalities are not least among the factors which explain this success. Of course, there are other reasons, and one of the main ones is the actual link of picture or image with word at which Goscinny and Uderzo excel and which Goscinny considers the most important element in accounting for the success of any comic strip.<sup>23</sup>

Two years later, Nye explained the popularity of "Astérix" in more essentialist terms. The choice to situate the series in the time of the Gauls, he argued, was

an inspired one, for every Frenchman has a soft spot in his heart for the Gauls. To the French, the Gaul is the equivalent of the American frontiersman, whose personal qualities form the basis of the French character and whose deeds provide him with a national folklore. No matter whether he was born in Strasbourg or Paris or Martinique or Algeria, or whether his name is Hennessy or Cohen or Filippini or Dupont, the average

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<sup>22</sup> Philippe Lanoë, *Astérix in Britain* (Paris: Bédésup, 199) 170.

<sup>23</sup> Christopher Pinet, "Myths and Stereotypes in Asterix le Gaulois" *Canadian Modern Language Review* 34 (1980): 161.

Frenchman feels kinship with the Gauls, who absorbed their conquerors and created their own unique, individualistic culture.<sup>24</sup>

Gosciny himself, speaking to the Rotary Club of Paris in May 1967, sidestepped any attempt to account for the series' appeal and instead proclaimed the rise in popularity of "Astérix" during the 1960s a mystery:

Notre histoire, publiée dès le premier numéro de *Pilote*, remporte aussitôt un assez vif succès auprès de nos lecteurs, ce qui nous satisfait d'autant plus que sa publication sous forme d'albums semble également promise à un assez bon succès d'édition, le tirage de chaque nouvel album étant double du tirage de l'album précédent. Et puis, tout à coup, mystérieusement, il se passe quelque chose : le simple succès d'édition se transforme et devient le phénomène Astérix [...].<sup>25</sup>

Such explanations for the series' rise in popularity leave us unsatisfied, especially when delivered, as the first two accounts above were, in the absence of data on how "Astérix" has been read, commented on, and put to use by actual and multiple readers since 1959, and how the "Astérix" brand has been deliberately built and manipulated since its launch. More recent scholarship also skirts the issue of reception, use, and branding. Nicolas Rouvière, whose book, *Astérix ou les lumières de la civilisation*, won the *Le Monde* award for research excellence in 2006, attributes the series' "singular success" to its narrative premise, which allows the small and cunning to triumph repeatedly over the large and strong. He highlights the story's resonance with popular myths and attitudes of the day, especially those glorifying French resistance during the war and those promoting the image of an "eternal" France.<sup>26</sup> He attributes the series' ability to attract both young and old readers – the first *bande dessinée* to do so successfully – to the proliferation of "intercultural" references, which provides multiple layers of signification.<sup>27</sup> Classifying "Astérix" as utopian literature, Rouvière is more interested in the political, institutional, and psychological elements of the narratives and characterizations themselves than in how the series was read, received, and branded in France at the time(s) of publication.

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<sup>24</sup> Russel B. Nye, "Death of a Gaulois: Rene Goscinny and Asterix," *Journal of Popular Culture* (1980): 184.

<sup>25</sup> Guillot et. al. 208. Translation: "Our comic series, published in *Pilote* from the first issue, immediately became quite a success among our readers, which pleased us all the more since the series' publication in album format appeared equally poised for success, the print run of each new album being double that of the preceding album. And then, all of a sudden, mysteriously, something happened: the simple success in print underwent a transformation and became the Astérix phenomenon [...]."

<sup>26</sup> Rouvière 2.

<sup>27</sup> Rouvière 4.

André Stoll, on the other hand, the author of the first, full-length study on "Astérix," does investigate how the series was read by the French in the 1960s and 1970s. Published first as *Asterix, das Trivialepos Frankreichs* in Germany and subsequently translated by the author into French, Stoll's analysis, unlike Rouvière's, examines the interplay of both text and image, arguing that they work discursively and "in symbiosis" to create a mythical world largely dependent upon the cultural, political, and pedagogical foundations laid by the French Third Republic (1870-1940).<sup>28</sup> Stoll, much more than Rouvière, focuses on the cultural and historical milieux in which "Astérix" appeared, citing the unique look and feel of the *bande dessinée*, which reflected traditions in film, television, advertising, American comics, and even Pop Art, as well as its timely content as keys to its resonance among, in particular, adult French readers.<sup>29</sup> In addition, Stoll maintains that the polysemy and contradiction that characterize "Astérix" both prevent any single reading of it and discredit claims that the series was intended as serious political commentary.<sup>30</sup> Instead, he explores through "digressions" into the cultural, political, and pedagogical histories of France how Goscinny and Uderzo's liberal use of cultural allusions and stereotypes in "Astérix" presupposed the continued currency of such Third-Republic notions as secularism, reason, empire, and individualism well into the Fifth Republic. By offering multiple levels of meaning, he argues, "Astérix" became popular among French readers of all ages, social situations, and political persuasions.<sup>31</sup>

Such explanations for the series' rise in popularity, however, tend to privilege content analysis over any serious discussion of market, industry, branding, institutionalization, or historical context to explain the series' success. While the "X" factor is undoubtedly an important component of the popularity of cultural artifacts, this paper will instead investigate the conditions in France that proved favorable to the launch of "Astérix" in *Pilote* and which subsequently facilitated the series' sudden rise in popularity. We will illustrate, in so doing, that the series did not, in fact, become popular among adolescent and adult French readers alike "tout à coup, mystérieusement," as Goscinny would remember it, but rather arose within the public imagination as a result of deliberate marketing, advertising, and branding strategies, as well as through consecration by the national print press. This paper, then, will not analyze the text itself,

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<sup>28</sup> Stoll 129.

<sup>29</sup> Stoll 130.

<sup>30</sup> Stoll 18, 155.

<sup>31</sup> Stoll 19.

but rather will examine the Astérix "phenomenon" through a "production-of-culture" lens, relying heavily on Richard Peterson's sociological argument that "symbolic elements of culture do not spring forth full blown but are made somewhere by someone."<sup>32</sup> In his view, the "milieux" – industrial, organizational, economic, political, occupational – in which cultural objects take shape become constitutive of their form and their content.<sup>33</sup> We will argue as well that factors external to the production of "Astérix" influenced how the series was received in France. As we will discover by studying the production, dissemination, branding, and reception of "Astérix," the quality of Goscinny's narratives and of Uderzo's illustrations cannot alone account for the *escalade*<sup>34</sup> of "Astérix le Gaulois" during the decade of the 1960s. Instead, this paper will argue that Goscinny, Uderzo, *Pilote*, Dargaud Publishers, Radio-Luxembourg, merchandising partners, television stations, the national press, legislation, censure, and even the war and reconstruction all paved the way for, enabled, or played deterministic roles in the rise in popularity of "Astérix," the comics series, *Les Aventures d'Astérix*, the albums, and Astérix, the *emblème*.

To study how "Astérix" became a household name to nearly half of the French population by 1970, we will analyze primary data in two forms. Reader mail from adolescents and adults published in *Pilote* will shed light on why, and to what extent, Goscinny and Uderzo's magazine and star comics series resonated with the public and succeeded in reviving an ailing *bande dessinée* industry in France. While published letters to the editor may give us a distorted view of how "Astérix" was received by all readers of *Pilote*, since only those letters carefully selected and edited by the magazine saw the light of day, they nevertheless serve as good indicators of reader sentiment on a range of topics as well as reveal those issues pushed to the fore by the editors themselves. Reader mail, we will see, will confirm that *Pilote* attracted a large and loyal following as early as 1959 and that, over the course of the next few years, readers began to favor "Astérix" above the other series published in the magazine. *Pilote's* large community of loyal readers in turn contributed to the commercial success of "Astérix" in album format, which itself marked the series' transition from niche market to mainstream. An analysis of the marketing and advertising initiatives undertaken by *Pilote*, Radio-Luxembourg, Dargaud, and others will illustrate how deliberate branding tactics succeeded in increasing the public's exposure, and perhaps receptiveness, to the world of "Astérix." Journalists' reactions to "Astérix"

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<sup>32</sup> Richard A. Peterson, "Revitalizing the Culture Concept," *Annual Review of Sociology* 5 (1979): 152.

<sup>33</sup> Peterson 153.

<sup>34</sup> Translation: "climb."

in the national print press between 1963 and the early 1970s comprise the second form of primary data analyzed within this paper. As we will discover, media institutionalization of the creators and of their creation in favorable feature-length articles served as a final step in propelling the series to fame and in legitimizing *bande dessinée* in general as a respected new cultural form.

## **Plan**

The following chapters situate the success of "Astérix" within an evolutionary timeline of *bande dessinée* in order to investigate the specific conditions, events, and initiatives that facilitated the series' transformation from a mere comic strip for children to a darling of the "serious" national press by 1966. Chapter II examines the predominance of American and Belgian comics in France around the middle of the century and the impact of the French law of 1949 on subsequent developments in the field, which included the launch of *Pilote* by Goscinny and Uderzo. As we will see, political, economic, legal, and cultural conditions influenced the specific form "Astérix" would take and helped to create a ready market for the new French-language, France-focused, humorous comics series. Chapter III analyzes *Pilote's* format, content, mission, readership, and branding strategies in an effort to gauge how the magazine – and "Astérix," its star series – succeeded in attracting to the world of *bande dessinée* a large and diverse new audience comprised of adolescents and adults. Reader mail explains why *Pilote* resonated with its audience and reveals the rise in popularity of "Astérix" over the magazine's other comics series. Chapter IV illustrates how national print media coverage between 1963 and 1970 institutionalized "Astérix," the series, and Astérix, the symbol, as well as created celebrities out of Goscinny and Uderzo. The conclusion synthesizes the findings of this paper and offers final thoughts on maintaining a conceptual distinction between popularity and appeal in cultural studies attempting to analyze popular cultural phenomena.

## II PAVING THE WAY FOR *PILOTE*: 1830s - 1950s

### Introduction

Since the 1960s, French *bande dessinée* has moved out of the shadows as an "art mineur" and become the subject of theses, dissertations, symposia, yearly festivals, and even museum exhibits, such as 1967's ground-breaking *Bande dessinée et figuration narrative*, hosted by the musée des Arts décoratifs in Paris. Today, magazines, websites, libraries, and bookstores throughout France serve an avid BD-reading public comprised of children, adults, and fans of all ages in between. Publishers reissuing older comics series have introduced French readers to early efforts in the industry, all the while constructing a narrative of evolution and creative accomplishment that has helped to situate the field as worthy of academic inquiry and the patronage of "serious" readers. In 2006, six of France's top-ten bestsellers were comic books – not the throwaway soft-cover comic books frequently sold in the United States, but glossy, oversized, hardcover collectors' editions.<sup>35</sup> Yet despite French pride in its native *bande dessinée*, the trajectory of comics development in France was as much determined by the American and Belgian comics industries – their respective markets, journals, agencies, publishers, restrictions, and artistic styles – as it was shaped by conditions very specific to France. To analyze the rise in popularity of "Astérix" among French readers in the early 1960s, we must first investigate the market forces that paved the way for the singular success of *Pilote*, the journal attributed by many with having firmly established the ninth art among a mainstream French public, in large part due to the success of "Astérix."<sup>36</sup> This chapter will situate the evolution of French comics in relation to American and Belgian comics development by exploring magazine ownership and copyright laws, publishing traditions, union structure, wartime restrictions, protectionist legislation, censure, and content preferences, all of which influenced the creation of "Astérix" and shaped the path *bande dessinée* would take in France.

### The Emergence of Comics in Europe: 1830s - 1930s

In recent decades, the ongoing debate over the origins of French *bande dessinée* has acquired a decidedly political dimension. Must France's beloved ninth art concede American –

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<sup>35</sup> "Comic Wars," *Economist* 19 Dec. 2006.

<sup>36</sup> See Gaumer's interviews with the 1960s crowd at *Pilote* in Patrick Gaumer, *Les années Pilote : 1959/1989* (Paris: Dargaud, 1996).

or, perhaps more precisely, German-American-immigrant<sup>37</sup> – origins, or can we trace an alternate line of descent from Swiss-born Rodolphe Töpffer that bypasses early American comics development altogether? The answer is hardly simple. Although known then by other names,<sup>38</sup> comics in France and in the United States emerged independently but contemporaneously at the end of the nineteenth century, just as the illustrated book, the newspaper, the poster, the animated cartoon, and the movie began to reach mass markets.<sup>39</sup> If we define comics loosely as illustrated stories with or without accompanying text, "La Famille Fenouillard," introduced in 1889 by Christophe (Georges Colomb), himself heavily influenced by Töpffer, could stand as the first comics ever published. In the spirit of such a loose definition, academic and popular texts have cited the *images d'Épinal*, the Bayeux tapestries, the Lascaux cave paintings, and even Trajan's column as ancestors of the picture stories that appeared in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.<sup>40</sup> If, however, we define comics proper as commercially reproducible, sequential literature that relies on both text and image to tell a story in a specific way, the field of direct influence narrows considerably.<sup>41</sup> The printing press, in this scenario, takes on the role of midwife, making the birth of comics possible only through technological advances in ink and color reproduction on a new mass scale.<sup>42</sup> In this view, the *histoires en images* published by Töpffer beginning in the 1830s became the first popular literary format to exploit advances in print and to integrate, however marginally, illustrations with text.<sup>43</sup> Comics in its present form, in this scenario, would not have emerged until the turn of the century. Although Töpffer's influence on the evolution of both French and American comics is generally accepted, scholars wishing to chart the early evolution of French *bande dessinée* without leaving the continent of Europe draw

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<sup>37</sup> See Benoît Peeters's somewhat controversial argument in *La Bande dessinée* (Paris: Flammarion, 1993) 39.

<sup>38</sup> Peeters 11, 35. When Töpffer (1799-1846) published his seven volumes of "picture stories" between 1833 and 1846, his work at the time was known as "*histoires en estampes*." In the early 1900s, with the dominance of such strips as Caumery and Pinchon's "Bécassine," first published in 1905, and Forton's "Les Pieds Nickelés," first published in 1908, comics were referred to generally as "*les illustrés*." The American term "comics" was actually used in France into the 1960s. The French term "*bande dessinée*" emerged in the early 1960s as comics began to acquire a degree of legitimacy in the eyes of the French public and increasingly became an accepted subject of academic inquiry. See Thierry Groensteen, *Astérix, Barbarella & Cie : Trésors du musée de la bande dessinée d'Angoulême* (Paris: Somogy éditions d'art, 2000) 80.

<sup>39</sup> Pierre Couperie, Maurice C. Horn, Proto Destefanis, Edouard François, Claude Moliterni, and Gérald Gassiot-Talabot, *A History of the Comic Strip*, trans. Eileen B. Hennessy (New York: Crown Publishers, Inc., 1968) 9; Michel Pierre, *La Bande dessinée* (Paris: Larousse, 1976) 13.

<sup>40</sup> Frédéric Pomier, *Comment lire la bande dessinée* (Paris: Klincksieck, 2005) 43.

<sup>41</sup> Peeters 34.

<sup>42</sup> Henri Filippini, Jacques Glénat, Numa Sadoul, and Yves Varende, *Histoire de la bande dessinée en France et en Belgique : des origines à nos jours* (Grenoble: Éditions Glénat, 1984) 9.

<sup>43</sup> Peeters 36.

a direct line from Töpffer to Saint-Ogan's "Zig et Puce" (1925), passing through Wilhelm Busch's "Max und Moritz" (1865), Christophe's "La Famille Fenouillard" (1889), Caumery and Pinchon's "Bécassine" (1905), and Forton's "Les Pieds Nickelés" (1908).<sup>44</sup>

*Bande dessinée* purists, however, have argued at length that the first comics appeared in 1896 in the United States with Outcault's "Yellow Kid" and in 1925 in France with Alain Saint-Ogan's "Zig et Puce."<sup>45</sup> Frédéric Pomier interestingly sums up the debate over the definition of comics by dividing BD and comics scholars into two opposing camps: those who argue that a general interplay of text and image in graphic storytelling constitutes comics; and those who contend more soundly that technology and commerce play essential roles in comics creation and that text and image must follow established layout guidelines.<sup>46</sup> Adherents of the latter group define comics as comprised of vertical or horizontal strips divided into frames that segment a story into separate boxes, each of which contains text in balloons placed within illustrations.<sup>47</sup> The designation of the text balloon, in particular, as the essential criterion of comics has led to a consensus among the group that "Yellow Kid" and "Zig et Puce," both of which prominently featured text balloons, ushered in comics within their respective countries. Disagreement over origin, however, still lingers.<sup>48</sup>

After its debut, comics evolved in the United States much faster than in France for reasons of industry and market. Well into the 1920s, as American syndicates acquired and sold an increasing number of "funnies" to powerful newspapers such as Pulitzer's *New York World* and Hearst's *New York Journal*, French producers were still supplying "*narration imagée*" modeled after the antiquated *images d'Épinal* to the conservative children's publications that dominated their market.<sup>49</sup> The classic rivalry between Hearst and Pulitzer at the turn of the twentieth century pushed American production to new highs and defined, or redefined, rights of ownership to titles and characters. In France, the Offenstadt brothers, owners of the successful children's journals *Le Petit illustré* and *l'Épatant*, among others, dominated the publication and distribution of *les illustrés* in France.<sup>50</sup> Instead of reaching mass markets through adult publications, comics in France remained entrenched in the traditional "journaux pour enfants,"

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<sup>44</sup> Peeters 37-38; Couperie et. al. 11; Pierre 15.

<sup>45</sup> Filippini et. al. *Histoire* 9, 13, 19; Pierre 13; Couperie et. al. 55.

<sup>46</sup> Pomier 44.

<sup>47</sup> Pierre 11.

<sup>48</sup> de Choisy, for example, names "Les Pieds Nickelés" as the first French BD ever published (39).

<sup>49</sup> Pierre 15.

<sup>50</sup> Filippini et. al. *Histoire* 13.

whose conservative, family, and religious orientations determined the early evolution of the format.<sup>51</sup>

By 1909, 165 different strips had reached American audiences.<sup>52</sup> In France, illustrated stories appeared regularly, even through World War I, in popular journals such as *Le Petit illustré français*, which published "La Famille Fenouillard," *Jeudi de la Jeunesse*, *Le Petit journal illustré de la jeunesse*, *Les Belles images*, *La Jeunesse illustrée*, *Semaine de Suzette*, which featured "Bécassine," *l'Épatant*, which published "Les Pieds Nickelés," and *Fillette*, a hugely popular twice-weekly for girls.<sup>53</sup> Yet as Dirks's "Katzenjammer Kids" (1897), MacCay's "Little Nemo in Slumberland" (1905), George Harriman's "Krazy Kat" (1911), and MacManus's "Bringing up Father" (1913) established loyal followings in the United States, French creations, much more "primitive"<sup>54</sup> than their American counterparts, seemed to show no awareness of the prolific and innovative comics production taking place across the Atlantic.<sup>55</sup> At the time, American comics artists were experimenting with line and incorporating text into their illustrations with increasing dynamism. Creators during the same period in France stuck to what had worked successfully in their market for years: large illustrations with text as captions laid out below. As late as 1924, popular series such as Forton's "Bibi Fricotin," which appeared in *Le Petit illustré*, still featured text beneath the illustrations and few balloons. Even with the introduction of "Zig et Puce" in *Dimanche illustré* a year later, the French series showcased in *la presse enfantine* were slow to adapt and adopt well into the 1930s.<sup>56</sup>

Saint-Ogan, the first French illustrator to use text balloons exclusively, shares his title as "père de la BD [*bande dessinée*] française" with, perhaps not surprisingly, a Belgian.<sup>57</sup> In 1929, Hergé (Georges Remi) first published his new series "Tintin" in *Le Petit vingtième*, a supplement of the very conservative, Catholic daily *Le XXe siècle*. The popularity in France of the comics hero Tintin would not, however, surpass the popularity of Zig and Puce until after World War II.<sup>58</sup> Other introductions into the French market during the 1930s would play a much greater role in creating a vibrant new market for comics in France.

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<sup>51</sup> Filippini et. al. *Histoire* 9.

<sup>52</sup> Pierre 14.

<sup>53</sup> Filippini et. al. *Histoire* 13. The popularity of *Fillette* waned after World War I.

<sup>54</sup> Couperie et. al. 53.

<sup>55</sup> Pierre 14.

<sup>56</sup> Filippini et. al. *Histoire* 19; Couperie et. al. 179.

<sup>57</sup> Pierre 16. Translation: "the father of French comics."

<sup>58</sup> Couperie et. al. 73.

In America during the 1930s, comics production had hit its stride. The first science fiction-themed comic, Nowlan and Calkin's "Buck Rogers," appeared in 1929, as did Segar's "Popeye." "Dick Tracy," by Chester Gould, a prime example of the police-adventure strip, debuted in 1931.<sup>59</sup> Alex Raymond's "Flash Gordon" appeared in 1933. The "classic" period of American comics production was well underway. Disney found success with Mickey Mouse, the subject of the animated cartoon "Steamboat Willie" from 1928, and with "Donald Duck," introduced in 1934. Also in 1934, Milton Caniff began his popular adventure series, "Terry and the Pirates." Raymond launched two strips: "Jungle Jim" and "Secret Agent X9," the latter in collaboration with detective-story writer Dashiell Hammet. Al Capp's "L'il Abner" appeared in 1935, along with Ritt and Gray's "Brick Bradford." Burne Hogarth took over "Tarzan" in 1936. Harold Foster began publishing "Prince Valiant" in 1937 and Siegel and Shuster's "Superman" appeared a year later. Kane introduced the world to "Batman" in 1939.

In France during the same period, children's journals published by the Catholic press were selling well and innovation was scarce.<sup>60</sup> "Futuropolis" by Pello (1937) constitutes for some a rare example of ground-breaking experimentation in comics in France during the 1930s.<sup>61</sup> Although American comics did have a small presence in France as early as the 1920s, French producers and the French readership during the 1930s were still largely unacquainted with American technique and American titles.<sup>62</sup> The formation in 1928, however, of the agency Opera Mundi by Paul Winkler, a Hungarian businessman, altered the French BD landscape dramatically. As sole representative in France of King Features Syndicate – and its treasure trove of blockbuster American comics –, Winkler single-handedly introduced young French readers on a mass scale to Mickey Mouse, Tarzan, Flash Gordon, and the like.<sup>63</sup>

In the early 1930s, Winkler encountered fierce resistance among French publishers to his idea of placing American strips, even in translation, in their conservative children's magazines. Winkler chose to launch his own magazine, *Le Journal de Mickey*, in 1934 with Walt Disney's approval. The inaugural issue featured only American strips in translation and no work by French illustrators. It sold an astounding 400,000 copies, making the journal "un succès

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<sup>59</sup> Couperie et. al. 57, 61.

<sup>60</sup> Pascal Ory, "Mickey go home! La désaméricanisation de la bande-dessinée (1945-1950)," *"On tue à chaque page" : la loi de 1949 sur les publications destinées à la jeunesse* (Paris: Éditions du temps, 1999) 73.

<sup>61</sup> Couperie et. al. 183.

<sup>62</sup> Thierry Groensteen, "La mise en cause de Paul Winkler," *"On tue à chaque page" : la loi de 1949 sur les publications destinées à la jeunesse* (Paris: Éditions du temps, 1999) 53.

<sup>63</sup> Filippini et. al. *Histoire* 21; Groensteen "La mise" 54.

foudroyant."<sup>64</sup> With his first and subsequent journals (*Robinson*, founded in 1936, and *Hop-là*, launched a year later), Winkler supplied enthusiastic young readers with stories about Guy l'Éclair ("Flash Gordon"), Luc Bradefer ("Brick Bradford"), and Raoul and Gaston ("Tim Tyler's Luck").<sup>65</sup> In the same period, the French market was also introduced (not only by Winkler) to other American strips, including "La Famille Illico" ("Bringing up Father"), "Pim, Pam, Poum" ("The Katzenjammer Kids"), and "Jacques Barnès" ("Bill Barnes"). French publishers counterattacked with new journals of their own featuring native strips. *Jumbo*, which appeared in 1935, and the Offenstadt brothers' *Boum*, *Hardi*, and *Junior* attempted in vain to attract the attention of an audience enthralled by an aesthetic they had never seen before. Disney's "round, firm, elastic style"<sup>66</sup> soon became a point of reference for a new generation of comics enthusiasts, among them Albert Uderzo and René Goscinny. By the end of the decade, the best-selling strips in France featured not French comics heroes, but Tarzan, Flash Gordon, Mandrake the Magician, and Red Rider.<sup>67</sup>

### **The American Comics Invasion of France and the Law of 1949: 1940s**

French publishers and agencies, many collaborating with their American counterparts, determined the path comics production and distribution would take in France during the 1930s and 1940s. The French industry as a whole continued to fight the influx of foreign strips in their magazines before the war, even going so far as to propose legislation protecting French publishers and illustrators.<sup>68</sup> Yet the traditional press could not compete with the large physical size, the extensive use of color, and the high paper quality of the new journals publishing foreign (American) strips.<sup>69</sup> In addition, publishers and agencies found it cheaper to procure the rights to foreign strips to be published in translation than to commission original series by French creators.<sup>70</sup> Even when they did, French producers found themselves working under increasingly

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<sup>64</sup> Filippini et. al. *Histoire* 19. Translation: "a devastating success."

<sup>65</sup> Pierre 19.

<sup>66</sup> Couperie et. al. 219.

<sup>67</sup> Richard I. Jobs, "Tarzan Under Attack: Youth, Comics, and Cultural Reconstruction in Postwar France" *French Historical Studies* 26.4 (2003): 692-693.

<sup>68</sup> Jobs 693.

<sup>69</sup> Winkler was not the only publisher to bring foreign comics to France. Other *maisons d'éditions* also specialized in foreign comics, including Lug and Sagedition, which both imported predominantly Italian BD, and Imperia, which published French and foreign strips. See Filippini et. al. *Histoire* 199.

<sup>70</sup> Accounts of pay and cost differ. According to one estimate, the cost per issue of one page of original French BD a decade later in 1948 was 40,000 F; imports that same year ran 5,000F - 10,000F per page. See Ory "Mickey" 74.

unsustainable conditions. Under contract, they were obliged to surrender the rights to their work – title, subject, and characters – to the publishers or agencies upon delivery. To make matters worse, some French journals made a practice of purchasing rights to American strips, publishing them briefly to establish a following, and then renaming them to create "new" strips that they would own exclusively. In assembly-line fashion, French artists were then commissioned to continue the American series (now appearing under new French names) by imitating the styles and storylines of the originals. Indiscriminate young French readers, however, snatched up both original American strips in translation and the new series of questionable quality featuring new names but familiar plots and characters.<sup>71</sup>

The alleged subpar quality of comics in France during the 1930s and 1940s became a chief catalyst behind the movements for the establishment of protectionist legislation. American comics did, in fact, undergo extensive editing – often quite rudimentary – at the hands of French publishers before they ever saw the inside pages of a journal.<sup>72</sup> To force layouts, strips were often shrunk in size, frames eliminated, objects removed, clothing added or redrawn (especially with female characters), and balloons enlarged, since the translated text generally required more white space than the original English.<sup>73</sup> In some cases, balloons were eliminated altogether to approximate the traditional French layout of the *illustrés*, with text placed directly beneath the images.<sup>74</sup> Despite such working conditions, the period was not wholly unproductive for French comics creators. Standouts included Jean Ache's "Arabelle, la dernière sirène" and Le Rallic's "Pancho Libertas." Raymond Poïvet also saw his series "Les Pionniers de l'espérance" debut in the popular new Communist journal *Vaillant*. During this period, Uderzo's own illustrations also entered the world of *bande dessinée* in the forms of "Arys Buck" and "Belloy l'invulnérable."<sup>75</sup>

The war years again shook up the composition of the French comics industry and finally allowed French and Francophone comics to gain a firm foothold at home, despite the roaring successes of several American magazines. Across the Atlantic, the number of comics in the United States had skyrocketed during and immediately after the war. In 1940, approximately 150 strips were circulating in the United States in a \$20m industry that sold 17m copies a year. By

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<sup>71</sup> See Couperie et. al. 129 for an overview of market organization during this time.

<sup>72</sup> Couperie et. al. 137.

<sup>73</sup> See Pierre 114; Couperie et. al. 143; and Jobs for interesting side-by-side comparisons of doctored illustrations from "Tarzan."

<sup>74</sup> Couperie et. al. 145.

<sup>75</sup> Couperie et. al. 95.

1950, the presence of over 300 strips increased yearly sales to \$41m. Just three years later, 650 strips brought in over \$90m yearly, with copies sold reaching 63m. In 1948 alone, 107 new titles appeared on the American market, the majority in the form of crime comics.<sup>76</sup> In France before the war, up to 85%, according to some claims, of the content published in BD monthlies was foreign in origin (and predominately American).<sup>77</sup> Estimates of the size of the French market are unfortunately unverifiable today, although sources indicate that *la presse enfantine* was selling 22m copies monthly by 1948. Approximately 20 weekly magazines sold 3m copies a week, with another 200 or so periodicals averaging weekly circulations of 25,000 copies each. By 1950, the French market had decreased to 127 periodicals, among them 29 heavy-hitting weeklies.<sup>78</sup> The magazine *Tarzan*, for example, was doubling the weekly take of its closest French competitor, *Vaillant*, with a circulation of approximately 300,000. With its reappearance in 1952, *Le Journal de Mickey* sold a whopping 600,000 copies a week, a record for any *illustré* ever published in France.<sup>79</sup> Even the Belgian journal *Tintin*, which had earlier found an eager market in France, was outdone by the weeklies featuring American strips.<sup>80</sup>

The Nazi invasion of France in 1940 and the subsequent banning of American comics imports by the occupiers had nevertheless created an entrée, however tentative, into the French market for native comics. Several publishers of foreign strips moved into the Vichy-controlled South and managed to maintain readerships in the *zone libre*. Many, however, ceased or interrupted publication, as *Le Journal de Mickey* did in 1944. As the war continued, French *bande dessinée* slowly began to appear alongside American comics in translation. Whether or not we agree that the pro-Nazi journal *Le Téméraire*, published in the occupied zone, stands today as "le premier grand journal de bandes dessinées français," its presence, along with the emergence of new French-only BD journals, such as Marijac's *Coq Hardi*, marked a turning point for the French comics industry.<sup>81</sup> Following liberation, American agencies once again invaded France to peddle their product, which was, as before, readily placed in French journals. Yet due to

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<sup>76</sup> Pierre 117.

<sup>77</sup> Pierre 114.

<sup>78</sup> Ory "Mickey" 72.

<sup>79</sup> Groensteen *Astérix* 80.

<sup>80</sup> Jobs 704.

<sup>81</sup> Filippini et. al. *Histoire* 21. Translation: "the first French comics magazine of any consequence."

changing market conditions during the war years, America finally began to lose its stronghold on the French comics industry.<sup>82</sup>

Despite the "explosion"<sup>83</sup> of publishing houses and new *bandes dessinées* immediately following the war, the French illustrated press was confronted with a far greater problem than that of American competition.<sup>84</sup> Paper and ink were scarce. Once-great journals, upon resuming publication, were forced to cut back to just four or eight pages.<sup>85</sup> In addition, readership was changing, perhaps due to the general "déconfessionalisation" of French youth across the middle of the century.<sup>86</sup> As a result, the predominance of the traditional and Catholic journals began to wane. *Vaillant*, launched in June of 1945, marked the turning of the era away from American dominance towards all things "100% français," especially in the children's literature market, a development that would profoundly influence the later formation, and perhaps success, of *Pilote* and "Astérix."<sup>87</sup> Although virulently anti-American, *Vaillant* modeled itself after the successful large-format magazines featuring American strips and even published new French series "fortement inspirées par un modèle américain."<sup>88</sup> Into the late 1940s, the magazine aimed to situate itself as the prime rival of not just the American-focused magazines, but also of its two Belgian competitors, *Tintin* and *Le Journal de Spirou*. Meanwhile, production costs at the close of the 1940s continued to rise, throwing the illustrated press into disarray and precipitating the disappearance of numerous journals.<sup>89</sup>

Politically, the second half of the 1940s in France was dominated by a plurality of factions each jostling for influence during the first years of a very unstable Fourth Republic (1946-1958). With reconstruction barely underway, uncertain relationships among the victory powers, the onset of the Cold War, and increasing realization of France's humiliating defeat, occupation, and collaboration during the war, national focus turned inward, or, more precisely, onto the next generation. Eight hundred thousand babies were born each year in France from January 1946 to the end of 1950. The population explosion placed a national spotlight upon

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<sup>82</sup> Jobs 693.

<sup>83</sup> de Choisy 71.

<sup>84</sup> Couperie et. al. 87.

<sup>85</sup> de Choisy 62.

<sup>86</sup> Ory "Mickey" 73.

<sup>87</sup> Pascale Goetschel and Emmanuelle Loyer, *Histoire culturelle de la France de la Belle Époque à nos jours* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2005) 160.

<sup>88</sup> Filippini et. al. *Histoire* 95-99. Translation: "strongly inspired by the American model."

<sup>89</sup> de Choisy 71.

children, who for many held the promise of national rejuvenation through proper moral training.<sup>90</sup> French leaders began to envision a moral reconstruction of their country through the *formation* (in the French sense of the word) of youth in tandem with the physical reconstruction that was already evident.<sup>91</sup> Along with radio and foreign cinema, the children's press – and comic books in particular – became targets of national concern.<sup>92</sup> At the time, the circulation of some weekly journals and comic books surpassed even the circulation of the adult press.<sup>93</sup> In addition, rising juvenile delinquency rates had caught the attention of the National Assembly. Cleaning up or redirecting the children's press seemed the logical first step in reestablishing "a specifically French national identity emphasizing community, social and civic responsibility, rational progress, morality, and integrity."<sup>94</sup> In the late 1940s, powerful political and special interest groups appeared to unite on moral ground to propose legislation all but banning the importation of foreign (American) comics. The law passed on July 16, 1949 – known as the law of 1949 – set out explicit guidelines for "good" practices in the French BD market and established a commission to regulate all "publications destinées à la jeunesse."<sup>95</sup>

Yet given the nature of the Fourth Republic, the picture is more complicated still. No united front against the juvenile press in fact existed, or at least those who lobbied in favor of protectionist legislation had their own reasons for doing so.<sup>96</sup> Communists, Catholics, former Resistants, secularists, and others, operating in "le triple contexte d'un antiaméricanisme militant, d'un protectionnisme culturel exacerbé[,] et d'un projet politique de reconstruction de la société

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<sup>90</sup> Jean-Pierre Rioux, "L'ardent contexte," "On tue à chaque page" : la loi de 1949 sur les publications destinées à la jeunesse (Paris: Éditions du temps, 1999) 68.

<sup>91</sup> Levègue makes a necessary argument against ahistorical conclusions when she reminds us that the Popular Front had also viewed youth as an "incarnation de l'avenir" during the 1930s. See Françoise Levègue, "Mathilde Leriche, une bibliothécaire d'influence et la presse enfantine," "On tue à chaque page" : la loi de 1949 sur les publications destinées à la jeunesse (Paris: Éditions du temps, 1999) 37-8.

<sup>92</sup> Groensteen 56.

<sup>93</sup> Jobs 690.

<sup>94</sup> Jobs 688.

<sup>95</sup> Interestingly enough, France was the first, but not the only, Western nation to enact such legislation. In 1954, American comics editors collaborated with regulating officials to develop a "comics code" defining good and bad content and practices. Overwhelmingly moral in tone and backed by politicians, parents, sociologists, and civic and religious leaders, the comics code was intended in part to protect comics editors from more stringent regulation by federal and state authorities. The code stipulated, among other things, that comics should not glorify crimes or criminals, should refrain from obscenity and indecency, should not feature instances of kidnapping, should ensure that Good triumphs over Evil, and should avoid presenting divorce as a desirable outcome. The code ultimately proved difficult to enforce, although civic organizations were established within many states to monitor comics content. See Pierre 123-127.

<sup>96</sup> Thierry Crépin, "Le mythe d'un front commun," "On tue à chaque page" : la loi de 1949 sur les publications destinées à la jeunesse (Paris: Éditions du temps, 1999) 50-51.

française plaçant au cœur de ses préoccupations la protection de l'enfance," became the most dogged proponents of the proposed legislation.<sup>97</sup> Three groups in particular came to the fore. Catholic leaders and educators, predominantly motivated by xenophobia, "antimaçonnisme," anti-Semitism, and anti-Communism, led the attack against the Offenstadt brothers.<sup>98</sup> Educators in general, including the secularists, were motivated more by puritanism and moralism.<sup>99</sup> The Communists, motivated by anticapitalism, anti-Americanism, protectionism, and a fear of resurgent fascist propaganda, waged an ardent campaign for 100% French artisanal production, especially in the domain of BD. In addition, French illustrators, long disenfranchised by the contractual status quo of the industry and by fierce American competition, formed two unions, each endorsing the proposed legislation: le Syndicat National des Dessinateurs de Presse (S.N.D.P.), and the Syndicat des Journalistes Français (S.J.F.), section dessinateurs.<sup>100</sup> Despite several previous attempts, the proposed legislation was only passed into law when French president Vincent Auriol took up the crusade against juvenile delinquency in 1947 and attempted to draw a causal link between wayward youth and the state of the children's press.<sup>101</sup>

The law of 1949, a "mi-chemin entre intimidation et répression," vested the Commission for the Oversight and Control of Publications for Children and Adolescents with no real power.<sup>102</sup> Its members reviewed all periodicals intended for publication, made editorial suggestions to publishers, and issued sanctions and warnings demanding the removal of inappropriate material. Yet the maximum penalty the Commission could levy for the first infraction consisted of a year in jail, a 25,000F fine, and a suspension of publication.<sup>103</sup> Only one publisher has ever been brought up on charges,<sup>104</sup> and his punishment equated to a 500F fine and

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<sup>97</sup> Jean-Paul Gabilliet, "Avant-propos," "On tue à chaque page" : la loi de 1949 sur les publications destinées à la jeunesse (Paris: Éditions du temps, 1999) 5. Translation: "the triple context of militant anti-Americanism, heightened cultural protectionism, and a political project aimed at reconstructing French society by placing the protection of youth at the center of its concerns."

<sup>98</sup> Jean-Yves Mollier, "Aux origines de la loi du 16 juillet 1949, la croisade de l'abbé Bethléem contre les illustrés étrangers," "On tue à chaque page" : la loi de 1949 sur les publications destinées à la jeunesse (Paris: Éditions du temps, 1999) 29.

<sup>99</sup> Crépin "Le Mythe" 45-46.

<sup>100</sup> Pierre 111.

<sup>101</sup> Crépin "Le Mythe" 50.

<sup>102</sup> Gabilliet 5; Thierry Crépin, "Une Commission entre intimidation et répression 1950-1954," "On tue à chaque page" : la loi de 1949 sur les publications destinées à la jeunesse (Paris: Éditions du temps, 1999). Translation: "a cross between intimidation and repression."

<sup>103</sup> Patrick Wachsmann, "La loi du 16 juillet 1949 et la liberté d'expression," "On tue à chaque page" : la loi de 1949 sur les publications destinées à la jeunesse (Paris: Éditions du temps, 1999) 11.

<sup>104</sup> The law of 1949 is still in effect today.

a month in prison.<sup>105</sup> The law of 1949 did, however, usher in a period of legitimation for *bande dessinée* in general. By imbuing the debate with an overwhelming moral tone, the law ensured "une production de bandes dessinées en harmonie avec les goûts de la classe moyenne;" the ninth art, as regulated by law, was finally poised to gain mainstream acceptance.<sup>106</sup>

The bulk of the Commission's work was largely defined by Article 2, which stipulated that publications targeting children under the age of 18 not feature "aucune illustration, aucune chronique, aucune rubrique, aucune insertion présentant sous un jour favorable le banditisme, le mensonge, le vol, la paresse, la lâcheté, la haine, la débauche ou tous actes qualifiés crimes ou délits ou de nature à démoraliser l'enfance ou la jeunesse[...]."<sup>107</sup> By this measure, Winkler's publications – especially the *Journal de Mickey* – and other journals featuring foreign content, such Cino Del Duca's *Hurrah !*, which ran "Tarzan," became the primary targets of both the Commission and the public. Tarzan, in particular, because he was usually drawn half-clad with bulging muscles, was accused of portraying savagery and perverse sexuality in a positive light.<sup>108</sup> Comics suitable for children, the Commission argued, should limit elements of fantasy, feature a "good" hero, construct logical storylines, present science and daily life with verisimilitude, ensure that success not come without "effort" and "intelligence," curtail portraits of abusive power, develop storylines around more than two characters, eliminate vulgarity, use good grammar, and even avoid garish colors and dizzying lines.<sup>109</sup> During its first year, the Commission reviewed the works of 29 editors and issued warnings as deemed necessary. By 1950, over two dozen magazines had disappeared and seven had been suspended. By the end of 1951, market leaders in France included a mix of old and new titles: newcomers *Vaillant*, *L'Intrépide*, *Âmes vaillantes*, and *Fripounet et Marisette*, the latter two Catholic journals, distributed a respectable 100,000 to 150,000 copies per issue; old-timers *Bayard*, *Bernadette*, *Coeurs viallants*, *Fillette*, and *Lisette*, most of which were destined for girls, continued to do well. Editors of the remaining journals on the market survived by imposing their own forms of

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<sup>105</sup> Pierre 128-129.

<sup>106</sup> Gabilliet 5. Translation: "comics production in harmony with the tastes and preferences of the middle class."

<sup>107</sup> Pierre 128. Jobs translates the passage as follows: publications "should not contain any illustration, any narrative, any chronicle, any heading, or any insertion that favorably presents banditry, falsehoods, thievery, idleness, cowardice, hatred, debauchery, or any criminal acts or misdemeanors of a nature demoralizing to children or youth" (691).

<sup>108</sup> Jobs 704.

<sup>109</sup> Pierre 130.

in-house censure to ensure that their publications conformed to the requirements of the new law.<sup>110</sup>

### **The Reign of Belgian Comics in France: 1950s**

In the first several years of the 1950s, approximately 2,000 journal issues per year passed under the scrutiny of the Commission. During this time, roughly 150 journals or magazines were in circulation in France, among them the popular Belgian journals *Tintin* and *Spirou*, which published Francophone favorites such as Morris and Goscinny's "Lucky Luke" and Peyo's "Les Schtroumpfs" ("The Smurfs") in addition to "Tintin" and "Spirou et Fantasio." Although the Commission issued, during the same period, 135 recommendations, 45 warnings, and 41 sanctions,<sup>111</sup> the Belgian journals for the most part escaped the Commission's censorial eye. The children's press in Belgium, however, had always had strong connections to Catholic and *scoutiste* groups.<sup>112</sup> Nearly a fourth of Belgian illustrators published regularly in magazines whose dominant values were "spiritualisme, moralisme, [et] conservatisme."<sup>113</sup> Hergé himself was a Scout; his strip "Tintin" had at times featured themes wholly in line with the conservative – and anti-Communist – agenda of the powerful French right. Even though Belgian comics were technically foreign, the law of 1949 gave journals like *Tintin* and *Spirou* a definite leg up in the French market, which they dominated, alongside *Le Journal de Mickey*, until the late 1950s. Scholars in retrospect have designated 1948 to 1960 the "âge d'or"<sup>114</sup> of Belgian *bande dessinée*.<sup>115</sup>

The "école belge," led by Hergé, revolutionized the style of French comics. Hergé's clean lines, deliberate strokes, clear color, and use of few shadows, all typified in the adventure series "Tintin," greatly influenced the next generation of Francophone BD artists.<sup>116</sup> "Tintin," however,

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<sup>110</sup> Jobs 703.

<sup>111</sup> Jobs 720.

<sup>112</sup> Stanislas Faure, "Entre protectionnisme et bonne tenue morale : les éditeurs belges et l'article 13 de la loi sur les publications pour la jeunesse (1949-1967)," "On tue à chaque page" : la loi de 1949 sur les publications destinées à la jeunesse (Paris: Éditions du temps, 1999) 119.

<sup>113</sup> Filippini et. al. Histoire 29; Ory "Mickey" 83.

<sup>114</sup> Translation: "golden age."

<sup>115</sup> Pierre 36. See also Pomier's interesting argument against arbitrarily designating the 1950s the Golden Age of Belgian production (47).

<sup>116</sup> Henri Filippini et.al., Guide de la bande dessinée pour la jeunesse : historique, héros, séries, journaux (Paris: Bordas, 2006) 66.

had gotten off to a relatively slow start in Belgium.<sup>117</sup> As readership increased over the years, likenesses of the characters in "Tintin" were featured on covers, in illustrations, and in promotional pieces throughout Belgium.<sup>118</sup> When "Tintin" was released in album format in 1944, global circulation jumped from 275,000 copies to 4.5m copies in just ten years.<sup>119</sup> As one of the only strips published in high-quality album format during the immediate post-war years, "Tintin" was able to maintain its strong presence on the market, as was the journal by the same name.<sup>120</sup> In the 1950s, publishers like Le Lombard in Belgium released a large number of Belgian *bandes dessinées* in album format, although a preference for "Tintin" had already been established. In France, the publisher Dargaud introduced the BD market to "Tintin" in 1948 by issuing a French edition of the journal *Tintin*. Compared with other journals on the market at the time, *Tintin's* ratio of original *bandes dessinées* to "matériel d'agence" contributed to making it a reader favorite.<sup>121</sup>

Likewise, the journal *Spirou* captured a significant share of the French BD market during the 1950s. Launched in 1938, the journal featured, among others, Franquin's strips "Spirou et Fantasio" and "Gaston Lagaffe" and Will's "Tif et Tondu," as well as the wildly popular strip "Lucky Luke," written by Goscinny from 1955 on and voted reader favorite by 6,005 voters in 1964.<sup>122</sup> During the 1950s, the journal increased steadily in pages, with circulation of the French edition peaking in the late 1950s at 200,000 copies.<sup>123</sup> More importantly, perhaps, was the concentration of talent associated with the magazine. André Franquin, Maurice de Bévère (Morris), Willy Maltaite (Will), Eddy Paape, Joseph Gillain (Jijé), Victor Hubinon, Jean-Michel Charlier, and Goscinny, some of the best and the brightest in the Francophone comics world at the time, and some of the most famous *scénaristes* and *dessinateurs* the field has ever produced, were all associated with *Spirou* throughout the 1950s. In addition, members of this core group of writers and illustrators spent time in New York at the sides of their compatriots across the Atlantic, where comics series were slowly moving away from crime comics and thrillers and

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<sup>117</sup> Filippini et. al. *Histoire* 31.

<sup>118</sup> Filippini et. al. *Histoire* 31.

<sup>119</sup> Couperie et. al. 101.

<sup>120</sup> Filippini et. al. *Histoire* 33.

<sup>121</sup> Filippini et. al. *Histoire* 67, 81; the French edition of *Tintin* nearly doubled the number of copies sold between 1954 (136,000) and 1964 (270,000).

<sup>122</sup> Pascal Ory, *Goscinny (1926-1977) : La liberté d'en rire* (Paris: Perrin, 2007) 107.

<sup>123</sup> Filippini *Histoires* 85.

experimenting with humor and adventure.<sup>124</sup> Also significant to the predominance of the Belgian school during the 1950s was the formation of the dual agency World's Press/International Press by Georges Troisfontaines in collaboration with Hubinon and Charlier. The Belgian agency formed a collective of European artists and writers whose work it then supplied on a regular basis to *Spirou* and other journals, much like an American agency would. A final boost to *Spirou's* popularity arrived in the late 1950s with the publication in album format by Les Éditions Dupuis of some of the most successful strips from the magazine, among them Franquin's "Spirou et Fantasio," "Buck Danny" by Charlier and Hubinon, and Jijé's "Jerry Spring."

At the close of the 1950s, the latest journal to hit the market would challenge and eventually topple the reign of Belgian comics in France. Charlier, Goscinny, Uderzo, and Jean Hébrard, all previously with the World's Press/International Press in Brussels, started *Pilote* with the intention of featuring only French *bandes dessinées*. Some of the writers and illustrators previously working in Belgium joined Goscinny et. al. at *Pilote*. Others moved around within Belgium as management, format, and style changes plagued *Tintin* and other magazines. The glory days of "l'école belge" were drawing to a close. By 1963, the circulation of the French edition of *Spirou* had fallen to 182,000, despite the publisher's efforts to revive the magazine by introducing American strips like "Beetle Baily" and "Denis the Menace." By 1976, the circulation of the French edition of *Tintin* had shrunk to fewer than 76,000 copies in France; its fall during the previous decade had been "spectaculaire."<sup>125</sup>

### **René Goscinny, Albert Uderzo, and Their New Magazine: 1959**

Goscinny and Uderzo met in Paris in 1951 as both were struggling to find work as comics authors and artists.<sup>126</sup> With similarities in their backgrounds and seemingly complementary personalities, they became close collaborators and, ultimately, very close friends, until Goscinny's untimely death in 1977 due to heart failure. The latter, a French Jew of Polish extraction, had spent the first decades of his life living with his family in a French colony in

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<sup>124</sup> A major influence at the time was Harvey Kurtzman, who founded the magazine *Mad* in 1952. Franquin, Gotlib, and Goscinny were significantly influenced by Kurtzman's foray into humor with *Mad*. See Pierre 107.

<sup>125</sup> Filippini et. al. *Histoire* 81-85.

<sup>126</sup> Both Goscinny and Uderzo, especially early in their careers, had written and drawn their own strips. When they first started working together, they decided that Uderzo was more skilled at illustration and Goscinny at writing. By the time they produced "Oumpah-pah," a precursor to "Astérix," Goscinny and Uderzo's roles were fixed as *scénariste* and *dessinateur*, respectively. Today, however, Uderzo writes and illustrates the "Astérix" albums himself.

Argentina, although he had attended the *collège français* in Buenos Aires and maintained a deep loyalty to France. Uderzo, the son of Italian immigrants to France, had grown up in the poorer suburbs of Paris. Goscinny had spent the war years in South America, but had lost three uncles in Paris to deportation; Uderzo had gone into hiding with his older brother in Brittany to escape the *travail obligatoire*, but had lost quite a few of his Jewish childhood friends during the war. Both, from young ages, were heavily influenced by Disney cartoons and by characters such as Laurel and Hardy, Uderzo perhaps more so. Each had also decided to pursue a career that, at the time, seemed unthinkable. Uderzo's father lamented his son's choice of a "métier de 'crève-la-faim'."<sup>127</sup> Goscinny, arriving in New York City in the fall of 1945 looking for employment as a *scénariste* or illustrator, experienced first-hand what "crève-la-faim" really meant. Although Uderzo had been producing drawings for the *grande presse* like *France Dimanche* and writing and illustrating comics from time to time since around the age of 14, he was still an unknown, struggling to make money. When the two met in 1951, Uderzo was working for the World's Press/International Press's Paris office on the Champs-Élysées. Goscinny, fresh off the boat after a disappointing and fruitless *séjour* in New York City, went to Brussels to ask Troisfontaines for a job. He was hired and sent to head up the office in Paris.<sup>128</sup> He sat at the desk next to Uderzo.

By the mid-1950s, working conditions at the World's Press/International Press had deteriorated and Uderzo and Goscinny had become disillusioned with editorial imperatives and the furious pace of work required for little financial reward or job security. Their first real collaboration, a humorous strip called "Oumpah-Pah" and an obvious precursor to "Astérix," had received no encouragement from the publishers and had been shelved indefinitely. The pair had also collaborated on an etiquette column for the girls' Catholic journal *Bonnes Soirées*, but each had to work small jobs illustrating or writing to pay the rent. After several years with the agency, they and other writers and illustrators contracting with World's Press met to create a "charte des dessinateurs" that might enable them as a whole to establish and defend their rights.<sup>129</sup> When Troisfontaines got wind of the meeting, he immediately fired Goscinny, the presumed ringleader. Uderzo, Charlier, and Jean Hébrard, then director of publicity at World's, abruptly quit the Belgian operation out of loyalty to Goscinny. Together, the foursome went out on their own and

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<sup>127</sup> de Choisy 60. Translation: "occupation of abject poverty."

<sup>128</sup> For detailed biographic information on Uderzo and Goscinny, see Ory *Goscinny*; de Choisy; Gaumer; Alain Duchêne, *Albert Uderzo* (Paris: Éditions du Chêne, 2002); Marie-Ange Guillaume, José-Louis Bocquet, and Anne-Elisabeth Botella, *René Goscinny : biographie* (Arles: Actes sud, 1997); and Guillot et. al.

<sup>129</sup> Gaumer 22.

founded the dual publishing and advertising agency Édipresse/Édifrance, based in Paris. Before the launch of *Pilote* in 1959, the agency primarily produced marketing and advertising collateral, some in the form of *bandes dessinées*, for clients such as Pupier chocolates and Fabrique-Union.

In the late 1950s, Hébrard pulled in François Clauteaux, a money man with strong ties to Radio-Luxembourg. At the time, the station had no real competitors in France and an "audience étonnante."<sup>130</sup> When Clauteaux approached Édipresse with the idea of launching a French-only BD journal to support the station's programming, the team gladly accepted the work. Clauteaux wanted the journal to set itself apart from the other magazines – French, Belgian, and American – currently on the market. Their journal would be printed in *grand format* (36.5 x 26.5 cm), partially in color, and on high(er)-quality paper. Most importantly, it would target "la jeunesse entièrement française," although it would have to rely on old friends in Belgium like Tillieux, Mitacq, and Hubinon to supply content to fill its pages.<sup>131</sup> Clauteaux's vision for *Pilote* was clear from the beginning: "pas de politique, pas de religion, mais des séries et des reportages typiquement français [...]." The magazine's title would signify two concepts: that of a figurative guide, illustrating "en positif des pistes, des voies, des orientations aux jeunes lecteurs," and, more literally, as a "pilote de course ou pilote d'aviation."<sup>132</sup> Given the nature of the articles and of the *bandes dessinées* it featured, *Pilote* would be understood primarily in the latter sense by both the media and the public.<sup>133</sup>

Over the next decade, *Pilote* would become "la référence" for French *bande dessinée* and the magazine of which everyone wanted to be a part.<sup>134</sup> Because Goscinny, Uderzo, and Charlier had left World's Press with bitter tastes in their mouths, they insisted on structuring their office as a collective in which the opinions of all members were solicited and considered. Weekly meetings were open to all and attendance was high, even among contracted artists who lived outside of central Paris.<sup>135</sup> Among *Pilote's* regular contributors over the next decade figured the greats or would-be greats of the age: Bretécher, Greg, Cabu, Gotlib, Gir, Duillet, Fred, Mandryka, Mézières, Gébé, Reiser, and others. The breadth of style among the *scénaristes* and

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<sup>130</sup> Gaumer 13; 117. Translation: "audience of astonishing size."

<sup>131</sup> de Choisy 127. Translation: "all-French youth."

<sup>132</sup> Translation: "No politics, no religion; just comics and typically French [news] coverage." The magazine's title would signify two concepts: that of a figurative guide, illustrating "ways, paths, and orientations to young readers," and, more literally, as a "racecar driver or airplane pilot."

<sup>133</sup> de Choisy 129.

<sup>134</sup> Gaumer 27.

<sup>135</sup> Gaumer 15.

*dessinateurs* who collaborated on *Pilote* under the co-direction of Goscinny and Charlier during the 1960s also brought together the best of comics from both sides of the Atlantic. The "renouveau de la bande dessinée d'expression française" was well underway.<sup>136</sup>

## Conclusion

As this chapter has illustrated, French *bande dessinée* evolved more slowly and in different ways than its counterparts in the United States, the true birthplace of comics, and in Belgium, whose BD had dominated the French market during the middle decades of the twentieth century. The conservatism of many French *illustrés* before the Second World War and the moral obligations many publishers felt towards youth after the war succeeded in privileging the *scoutiste* Belgian comics journals *Tintin* and *Spirou* over journals featuring American strips. The moral turn that characterized the public sphere in postwar France under the fractious Fourth Republic culminated in the law of 1949 to regulate "les publications destinées à la jeunesse." The law's direct influence on the French comics market cannot be overstated: magazines floundered and disappeared in the wake of the Commission's warnings and "recommendations;" American comics finally began to lose their foothold in the French market; French editors censured their own content; and creators developed strips wholly in line with the law's stated graphic and narrative imperatives. By the mid-1950s, after an initial reorganization of the industry, the French market seemed ready to chart its own path at last. Humor, an ingredient frequently absent in popular Belgian and American strips, made a comeback in France with new series by French writers and illustrators. Goscinny, in particular, had been interested for years in writing the kinds of humorous material that Belgian publishers seemed not to favor.<sup>137</sup> In fact, humorous strips (with notable exceptions<sup>138</sup>) seemed to fall flat with young Belgian readers as well as with Belgian editors. When Goscinny and Uderzo finally published their humorous strip "Oumpah-pah" in *Tintin's* Belgian edition, the series ranked below the top ten in a reader poll<sup>139</sup>, a rating

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<sup>136</sup> Pierre 21. Translation: "revival of French comics."

<sup>137</sup> Ory Goscinny 84.

<sup>138</sup> Groensteen argues to the contrary that humor was an integral component of a number of popular comics published in *Spirou*. See Groensteen *Astérix* 132-134. On the other hand, Nelly Feuerhahn interestingly points out that humor in Belgian comics usually surfaced primarily in secondary characters. See "Astérix dans la B.D." in *Ils sont fous... d'Astérix ! : Un mythe contemporain* (Paris: Éditions Albert René, 1996).

<sup>139</sup> Some publishers gauged reception by referendum, a process by which readers voted on their favorite strips. In general, strips not voted into the top ten spots were discontinued. "Oumpah-pah" was voted twelfth in a 1962 referendum and subsequently dropped from *Tintin*.

Uderzo explained as particularly revealing of the orientations towards humor in general of "les lecteurs belges, certainement un peu plus réticents à l'humour que les lecteurs français."<sup>140</sup> Into the 1950s, comics featuring humor in France slowly began to outpace more conservative adventure strips such as "Tintin," which itself did feature the occasional humorous running gag, and the ubiquitous crime-thriller series of American provenance. During the 1960s, the western and the science fiction tale were still en vogue in France, as were pirate tales and cape-and-dagger stories, the latter fortified by popular cinema.<sup>141</sup> Yet by the mid-1960s, humor had found its *grand public* in France with the success, most notably, of "Lucky Luke," "Les Schtroumpfs," and "Astérix."<sup>142</sup> During this period, *Pilote* would play a fundamental role in attracting a wide swath of French readers – young and old – to the burgeoning world of *bande dessinée* "100% française" and in promoting one series in particular above the rest: "Astérix le Gaulois."

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<sup>140</sup> Pierre 114. Translation: "Belgian readers, certainly a little more reticent towards humor than French readers."

<sup>141</sup> Groensteen *Astérix* 104.

<sup>142</sup> Filippini *Histoire* 71; see also Josiane Coudouy, *Le phénomène Astérix : mémoire prés. pour l'obtention de la maîtrise d'Enseignement de lettres modernes* (Toulouse: Institut de Recherches sur la Bande Dessinée, 1972) 23.

### III *PILOTE, ASTÉRIX, AND THE REVIVAL OF FRENCH BD: 1959 - 1966*

#### Introduction

The inaugural issue of *Pilote* appeared in kiosks around France on Thursday, October 29, 1959, amid great promotional fanfare on the country's number-one radio station, Radio-Luxembourg. The journal introduced 14-year-old French boys, its target market, to new French comics heroes that would soon become the anchors of the *bande dessinée* portion of the journal: the aviator Michel Tanguy and his sidekick Laverdure in "Les Aventures de Michel Tanguy," created by Charlier and Uderzo; the pirate Barbe-Rouge and his crew in Charlier and Hubinon's "Le Démon des Caraïbes;" and Goscinny and Uderzo's Astérix and company in their very first adventure, "Astérix le Gaulois." *Pilote*, however, offered much more than *bandes dessinées*. In the words of Marie-Ange Guillaume, "*Pilote* n'[était] pas un journal de bandes dessinées mais un journal d'information avec des bandes dessinées."<sup>143</sup> Only 10 of its 32 pages (in regular editions) were devoted to comics; the other 22 pages featured serious news and information articles, interviews with celebrities, games, contests, special interest pieces, how-tos, pedagogical tools, letters from readers, and the requisite three or so pages of *publicité*. By offering a range of entertainment and information, the journal hoped to become "un hebdomadaire grand public, une sorte de '*Paris-Match* pour jeunes'."<sup>144</sup>

*Pilote's* initial focus on aviation, sports, mechanics, history, animals, and celebrities like John Wayne, and even the themes of the comics featured – space exploration, science fiction, fantasy, adventure, the western – reflected the magazine's intention of winning the hearts of adolescent boys. Its formula proved successful. Massive promotional campaigns waged by Radio-Luxembourg on air before, at, and in the months and years following the magazine's launch established and solidified its presence on the market. On October 29, Roger Bourgeon, a station announcer, promoted the new journal tirelessly over the air waves from seven o'clock in the morning on. By the end of the day, *Pilote* had sold nearly 300,000 copies – a resounding success for any new entry into the children's literature market at that time in France.<sup>145</sup> Filippini nicely summarizes the range of factors that contributed to *Pilote's* initial success:

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<sup>143</sup> Guillaume et. al. 117. Translation: "*Pilote* wasn't so much a comics magazine as a news magazine with comics."

<sup>144</sup> Gaumer 60. Translation: "a mass-market weekly, a sort of '*Paris-Match* for kids.'"

<sup>145</sup> Gaumer 70. Reports of the number of copies sold in the first day vary between 200,000 and 300,000, depending on the source. Gaumer relies on the memory of Jean Donguès, a marketing executive at *Pilote* responsible for the magazine's public relations and promotional campaigns.

Il est intéressant de noter que la venue de *Pilote* coïncide avec les disparitions presque simultanées de *L'Intrépide*, *Hurrah*, *Mireille*, *Line*, *Pierrot*, *La Semaine de Suzette*, *Ima*,... Mais *Pilote* n'est pour rien dans ces abondons de parution [...]; ce sont les responsables de ces publications, souvent créées avant-guerre, qui n'ont pas senti que les lecteurs ne veulent pas qu'un simple journal se contentant d'amasser des bandes dessinées les unes derrière les autres. L'équipe de *Pilote* comprend qu'il fallait de la bande dessinée mais aussi autre chose. Les jeunes lecteurs de 1959 découvrent la télévision et l'image d'actualité. *Pilote* leur offre un grand nombre de pages magazines signées par des célébrités du petit écran et de la radio alors toujours très écoutée. N'oublions pas que *Pilote* doit son succès aux bandes dessinées et à ses articles mais aussi à Radio Luxembourg qui réalise une campagne de soutien comme il n'y en a jamais eu depuis.<sup>146</sup>

In retrospect, those present during the early years of *Pilote* view the period as the "âge d'or" not only of the magazine itself, but of French *bande dessinée* in general.<sup>147</sup> Recognition and commercial success – for some, at least – had arrived in full force by 1965, in large part due to the rising popularity of Astérix and Obélix. Already in 1963, "Astérix" was a "franc succès."<sup>148</sup> In July of 1965, *Pilote* changed the tagline of its masthead from "Le Magazine des jeunes de l'an 2000" to "Le Journal d'Astérix et d'Obélix."<sup>149</sup> The first French satellite was baptized "Astérix" in 1965. In 1966, the serious news magazine *L'Express* ran its now-famous article on *le petit Gaulois* provocatively entitled "Le phénomène Astérix." Astérix and Obélix more frequently graced the covers of *Pilote*. Character likenesses appeared increasingly in advertising and on scores of product labels. Dargaud had begun publishing previously run episodes in album format without any promotion at all, and they were flying off the shelves. Astérix's name had even been

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<sup>146</sup> Filippini *Histoire* 127. Translation: "It is interesting to note that the arrival of *Pilote* coincided with the near-simultaneous disappearances of *L'Intrépide*, *Hurrah*, *Mireille*, *Line*, *Pierrot*, *La Semaine de Suzette*, *Ima*,... But *Pilote* had nothing to do with their dropping out [...]; it was the fault of the editors of the magazines, many of which were created before the war, not realizing that readers were no longer satisfied with a magazine that simply compiled comic strips one on top of the another. The team at *Pilote* understood that comics were necessary, but that something else was needed as well. The young readers of 1959 were discovering television and image-heaving news reporting. *Pilote* offered them a large number of pages signed by celebrities of the small screen and the radio, which still had a large audience. Let's not forget that *Pilote* owes its success to comics and to its articles but also to Radio Luxembourg, who carried out an accompanying marketing campaign like there has never been since."

<sup>147</sup> From the interview with Cabu in Gaumer (104).

<sup>148</sup> From the interview with Guy Vidal in Gaumer (96).

<sup>149</sup> Translation: "The magazine for kids of the year 2000;" "The magazine of Astérix and Obélix."

invoked by politicians in the French National Assembly.<sup>150</sup> Georges Pompidou himself was a self-professed admirer and avid reader of the series, a fact that even brought the authors bad publicity.<sup>151</sup> Astérix had indeed become a "best-seller." By the mid-1960s, he was well on his way to becoming "le personnage le plus célèbre de toute la bande dessinée française."<sup>152</sup>

This chapter will explore the nature of *Pilote* and the extensive marketing and advertising that enabled Astérix's meteoric rise in popularity during the first half of the 1960s. As reception data and sales figures will aptly illustrate, the format and content of *Pilote* attracted not only hundreds of thousands of adolescent boys, but also girls, parents, educators, and other adults, many of whom were newcomers to BD from the mainstream French literate public. By recounting how the editors and publishers, radio stations, myriad merchandising partners, and readers promoted both *Pilote* and "Astérix" in the journal's early years, we will begin to understand the role that marketing and advertising played in pushing both the journal and its star series to the forefront of French popular culture by 1966.

### ***Pilote*: Old Format, New Content?**

Without *Pilote*, "Astérix le Gaulois" may never have seen the light of day. Goscinny had insisted that the strip's hero be clever, but also short, relatively unattractive, and of indeterminate age. Uderzo suggested the *faire-valoir*<sup>153</sup> Obélix, who, over the course of the first several adventures, morphed into a rounder, less muscular, and gentler sidekick whose obtuseness could complement Astérix's *esprit malin*.<sup>154</sup> Such an anti-hero pairing, even if drawn in the "gros nez" style that had contributed to Disney's popularity in France, could not hope to compete with more classic BD heroes like Tintin, or so market research indicated at the time. Goscinny explained: "Quand on a créé Astérix, les études de marché et autres enquêtes de motivation disaient : le héros doit être jeune et beau pour que le lecteur puisse s'identifier, et il faut traiter des problèmes actuels. Je ne crois pas aux études de marché [...]."<sup>155</sup> Added Uderzo: "Toutes ces études de marchés nous faisaient bien marrer. Aussi, par esprit de contradiction, j'ai affublé Astérix d'un

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<sup>150</sup> Coudouy 29.

<sup>151</sup> See Noël-Jean Bergeroux, "M. Pompidou épaula Astérix," *Le Monde*, 8 Sep. 1971: 6.

<sup>152</sup> Gaumer 32. Translation: "the most famous character in all of French comics."

<sup>153</sup> Translation: "sidekick" or "foil."

<sup>154</sup> Translation: "craftiness."

<sup>155</sup> Olivier Andrieu, *Le livre d'Astérix le Gaulois* (Paris: Les Éditions Albert René, 1999) cxxxv. Translation: "When we created Astérix, market research and other studies were saying: the hero needs to be young and good-looking so the reader can identify with him, and you need to address current issues. I don't believe in market studies [...]."

énorme appendice nasal surplombant de longues moustaches jaunes et un menton qui n'en finit pas de tomber. L'ensemble étant monté sur un maigre torse et des pattes courtes, chaussées de longs pieds. [...] D'ailleurs, je tiens à dire que, si nous n'avions pas eu l'opportunité de créer le journal *Pilote*, Astérix n'aurait jamais vu le jour, parce que tous les éditeurs l'auraient refusé."<sup>156</sup>

*Pilote's* role in introducing the "Astérix" series to the adolescent reading public, in maintaining its accessibility through guaranteed weekly distribution<sup>157</sup> at an affordable price, and in promoting the "Astérix" series over others cannot be overlooked, as several who study "Astérix" have done in the past.<sup>158</sup> By 1961, the loyal fanbase cultivated by the directors of the magazine provided a ready market for the first "Astérix" adventure published in hardcover album format. At the time, Georges Dargaud had just purchased the ailing *Pilote* for "un franc symbolique."<sup>159</sup> Unwilling to take undue financial risk with his new property, he issued the first hardcover "Astérix" album at a paltry print run of 6,000 copies and in the absence of any marketing expenditure whatsoever. The first edition, much to everyone's surprise, disappeared quickly. To understand how "Astérix" albums could sell so efficiently by mere "bouche à oreille"<sup>160</sup> only two years into its run in a niche market, we must first explore how *Pilote* differed from its competitors and was able to build a large and diverse readership who would be responsible for the success of "Astérix" in album format.

Was *Pilote* truly *innovateur* in format and content? Did *Pilote* mark a clean break with the *illustrés* emanating from Belgium and the United States that dominated the Francophone market during the 1950s, or did the new journal simply build on a tried-and-true formula that had been in circulation for decades? As we have seen, *bande dessinée* in France had been relegated to the children's press since the early 1900s and had proven largely incapable and unwilling to appeal to broader audiences. *Pilote*, however, situated itself strategically as a journal for

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<sup>156</sup> Andrieu cxxxv. Translation: "All of the market research really made us laugh. Also, in a contrarian spirit, I saddled Astérix with an enormous nasal appendage overhanging a long yellow moustache and a chin that fell to the floor. The whole ensemble was mounted on a skinny body and short legs fitted with oversized feet. Moreover, I must say that, if we hadn't had the opportunity to create the magazine *Pilote*, Astérix would never have seen the light of day, because all of the editors would have refused him."

<sup>157</sup> *Pilote* was published once a week throughout France until 1974, when it changed from a weekly to a monthly. With issue number 25 (April 14, 1960), *Pilote* became available on Wednesdays. It had previously appeared on Thursdays.

<sup>158</sup> Nelly Feurhahn's article, "Asterix, Obelix, Nous et les Autres : Une sociologie pour rire," in *Ils sont fous... d'Astérix! : un mythe contemporain* (Paris: Les éditions Albert-René, 1996) is representative of a general tendency to base the popularity of "Astérix" on numbers of albums sold without mentioning the potential impact of early readers of *Pilote*. Pascal Ory's argument in *Goscinnny* is a note-worthy exception.

<sup>159</sup> Gaumer 25. Translation: "for pennies."

<sup>160</sup> Translation: "word of mouth."

adolescents, not children; Goscinny claimed that he and Uderzo had even created the magazine "avec l'arrière-pensée d'en faire plus tard un journal pour adultes."<sup>161</sup> In addition, by approximating the *grande presse* with detailed articles covering more serious current events, *Pilote* was able to reach out to mature audiences not necessarily reading *Pilote* for its "histoires," or original BD. Readers frequently cited the "Pilotoramas," or the illustrated pedagogical tools featured at the journal's centerfold, as the magazine's most interesting and useful feature.

Reader mail published in the early issues of *Pilote* gives us a sense of the magazine's success not only with its target audience, but also with younger and older readers of both sexes. Michel Pierre argued in 1976 that mere circulation figures for a single magazine issue in the BD market most likely underestimated actual readership: "le même magazine est rarement lu par une seule personne mais par plusieurs, en général 2 ou 3."<sup>162</sup> In the letters to the editor published during *Pilote*'s early years, we can easily see the difficulty in calculating *Pilote*'s true circulation. Annie Le Thinevez, a reader from Rennes, wrote that "[t]out le monde se bat à la maison pour lire 'Pilote'," including her mother and father.<sup>163</sup> Serge Szmidt (Moselle) recounted: "À la maison, papa, maman, mon frère et moi lisons 'Pilote'. Papa prend la page des sports, maman celle de Nicolas et le frerot et moi nous partageons le reste [...]."<sup>164</sup> Likewise, in Nicole Lairat's family (Seine), "chacun a son histoire préférée de son feuilleton. Pour maman : c'est le 'Démon des Caraïbes'. Pour papa : le 'Pilotorama' et 'Robillard'. Pour mon frère : 'Astérix' et 'P'tit Pat.' Et moi : Michel Tanguy et 'Astérix'. Tes feuilles se détachent, vont à leurs destinataires et cela, crois-moi, évite bien des pugilats. Autrement dit, tu joues le rôle pacificateur."<sup>165</sup> The family of A. Clément had to establish a reading order to preserve the peace: "Le jeudi, nous nous l'arrachons tous, mes trois frères, mes parents et moi [...]; naturellement, c'est toujours papa qui le lit le premier, car, dit-il : 'Je dois contrôler la lecture de mes enfants'. Quel bon prétexte !

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<sup>161</sup> Guillot et. al. 171. Translation: "with the ulterior motive of creating a magazine for adults later on."

<sup>162</sup> Pierre 98. Translation: "a single issue is rarely read by only one person, but by many, in general 2 or 3."

<sup>163</sup> *Pilote* 7/31. From this point on, issue and page numbers for *Pilote* citations will be written in the following format to conserve space: 7/31, where 7 represents the issue number and 31 the page number. For corresponding publication dates, visit the *BD oubliées* online database at <<http://www.bdoubliees.com/journalpilote/annees/index.html>>. Translation: "everyone at home fights over who gets to read 'Pilote'."

<sup>164</sup> *Pilote* 20/2. Translation: "At home, dad, mom, my brother and I all read 'Pilote.' Dad takes the sports page, mom the page with Nicolas and my little brother and I share the rest [...]."

<sup>165</sup> *Pilote* 35/2. Translation: "everyone has their favorite serial. For mom: it's the 'Démon des Caraïbes.' For dad: the 'Pilotorama' and 'Robillard.' For my brother: 'Astérix' and 'P'tit Pat.' For me: Michel Tanguy and 'Astérix.' Your pages come apart, go to their recipients and that, believe me, prevents many a fight. In other words, you play the role of peacemaker."

Maman se sacrifie en le lisant toujours la dernière."<sup>166</sup> In some cases, one copy of *Pilote* simply wasn't enough to go around. From a Paris orphanage, Francis Léger wrote: "Nous sommes plus d'une centaine et avec un seul *Pilote* que je reçois ce n'est vraiment pas assez pour nous distraire."<sup>167</sup> Within Yves Bietlot's family (Belgium), we see a wide age range of young readers: "Au début, j'étais seul dans la famille à le lire mais, maintenant, c'est la bagarre avec mes frères et sœurs, le mercredi après-midi pour lire '*Pilote*' (j'ai deux frères : Robert dix-huit ans et Philippe douze ans et trois sœurs : Christiane vingt-deux ans, Arlette vingt ans et Chantal seize ans)."<sup>168</sup> Even octogenarians read *Pilote*. Jean-Pol Nourissier (Meuse) wrote: "Je me fais [...] une terrible joie quand je vois le facteur qui va m'apporter ce fidèle journal, avec ses dernières actualités. Aussi, je veux vous dire qu'aussitôt que j'ai lu ce journal, je dois aller le porter toutes les semaines chez un oncle qui a plus de 84 ans. Oui, il est encore plus joyeux que moi en recevant ce journal."<sup>169</sup>

Additional letters proved that *Pilote* tended to pick up new readers through world of mouth. Georges Filliet (Seine-et-Oise) learned about *Pilote* through a classmate,<sup>170</sup> the same as Jean-Olivier Domingue (Paris), who recounted: "Paul, mon meilleur camarade, m'a prêté '*Pilote*' une fois et depuis, je le lis toutes les semaines de la première page à la dernière ligne."<sup>171</sup> Micheline and Claudy (Belgium) also shared their *Pilote*, in this case with their father: "Quand papa arrive le soir, si '*Pilote*' n'est pas déjà là, il est triste... Toute la famille vous dit : 'Continuez à nous amuser et nous instruire!'"<sup>172</sup> Jean-François Mazzoleni managed to win over his disapproving father: "Ce journal l'intéressa énormément : ce qui lui a plu davantage est 'nos exclusivités sportives'. Ensuite comme le dîner n'était pas prêt, il me demanda la collection de

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<sup>166</sup> *Pilote* 35/2. Translation: "On Thursdays, we rip it up, all of us, my three brothers, my parents, and I [...]; naturally, it's always dad who reads it first because, as he says, 'I have to control what my kids are reading.' What a nice pretext! Mom always makes a sacrifice and reads it last."

<sup>167</sup> *Pilote* 52/insert. Translation: "There are more than a hundred of us here and the single issue of *Pilote* that I receive really isn't enough to entertain us all."

<sup>168</sup> *Pilote* 80/2. Translation: "In the beginning, I was the only one in my family to read it, but now, there's a brawl every Wednesday afternoon between my brothers and sisters to see who gets to read '*Pilote*' (I have two brothers: Robert, 18 years old, and Philippe, 12 years old, and three sisters: Christiane, 22 years old, Arlette, 20 years old, and Chantal, 16 years old)."

<sup>169</sup> *Pilote* 48/2. Translation: "I am overjoyed to see the postman delivering my trusty magazine, with its up-to-the-minute reporting. I want to also say that, as soon as I've read it, I have to go bring it each week to my uncle, who's more than 84 years old. Yes, he's even happier than I am to receive the magazine."

<sup>170</sup> *Pilote* 83/2.

<sup>171</sup> *Pilote* 100/2. Translation: "Paul, my best mate, once lent me '*Pilote*' and I've read it every week ever since, from the first page to the last line."

<sup>172</sup> *Pilote* 78/2. Translation: "When dad arrives home in the evening, if '*Pilote*' isn't already there, he's sad... Everyone in the family says: 'Continue to entertain us and to teach us.'"

'Pilote' dont j'ai tous les numéros, depuis le No. 1. J'en suis très fier."<sup>173</sup> Mrs. A. Gendre (Charente), a great-grandmother, thanked Goscinny for his short story "Nicolas:" "C'est moi, l'arrière-grand-mère, qui assure l'agréable mission de lire ces pages délicieuses à mes quatre petites-filles."<sup>174</sup> Mrs. Henri Dupont (Aisne), also a grandmother, shared the following with *Pilote*: "J'ai d'abord acheté *Pilote* pour mon petit-fils Gérard, qui vivait avec moi. Gérard a 14 ans et est reparti avec ses parents à Paris. Aussi j'ai continué à acheter *Pilote* pour mon propre compte. Je pense être la plus vieille lectrice de votre journal que j'apprécie beaucoup, et ma foi, j'ai répondu à votre référendum, comme si j'étais de 50 ans – au moins – plus jeune. En confiance, j'ai 67 ans [...]."<sup>175</sup>

Although letters to the editor did praise *Pilote* for its serious news articles, sports columns, "histoires," celebrity pages, reader contests, membership benefits, and more, the *Pilotoramas* quickly became a focal point of interest among adolescents and adults alike. François Clauteaux confirmed the popularity of the magazine's centerfold: "Le suffixe étant toujours à la mode, nous avons baptisé nos pages *Pilotoramas*. Leur succès était tel, qu'à la demande des enfants ou des instituteurs, nous avons dû parfois en réaliser des tirés à part."<sup>176</sup> Letters to the editor frequently offered corrections, commentary, praise, and requests for future *Pilotoramas*. Educators themselves even wrote to *Pilote* in praise of the pedagogical utility of the *Pilotoramas*. From Algeria, Edouard François wrote: "J'ai, en effet, trente-trois ans, et je ne crois pas être un attardé mental, étant professeur de lettres au lycée Duveyrier (Blida) et ex-étudiant en médecine. Je lis votre journal avec grand plaisir et mon épouse, qui est également professeur de lettres, et qui joint sa voix à la mienne dans cette missive, le lit aussi. Vous dire que j'utilise souvent les 'Pilotoramas' dans ma classe serait un éloge bien maigre [...]."<sup>177</sup> Simon Max, an

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<sup>173</sup> *Pilote* 35/2. Translation: "This magazine interested him enormously: what pleased him more was 'our sports exclusives.' Then, as dinner wasn't ready yet, he asked to see my entire 'Pilote' collection, which contains all the issues since the very first one. I'm very proud of it."

<sup>174</sup> *Pilote* 40/2. Translation: "It is I, the great-grandmother, who fulfills the agreeable task of reading these delicious pages to my four great-granddaughters."

<sup>175</sup> *Pilote* 55/2. Translation: "First, I purchased *Pilote* for my grandson Gérard, who was living with me. Gérard is 14 years old and has since gone back to Paris with his parents. I continued to buy *Pilote* for myself. I think I'm the oldest reader of your magazine, which I thoroughly enjoy, and, my goodness, I responded to your referendum as if I were 50 years younger – at least. In truth, I'm 67 [...]."

<sup>176</sup> From an interview in Gaumer (54). Translation: "The suffix being still en vogue, we baptized our pages *Pilotoramas*. Their success was such that, in response to requests from children and instructors, we were at times obligated to create versions on the side."

<sup>177</sup> *Pilote* 55/2. Translation: "I am, in fact, 33 years old, and do not think of myself as mentally handicapped, being a literature teacher at the Duveyrier (Blida) school and a former medical student. I read your magazine with great

instructor from Haute-Marne, stated: "Je prends régulièrement chaque semaine votre illustré 'Pilote' que j'apprécie particulièrement et qui intéresse vivement les élèves de ma classe. Le pilotorama que vous publiez dans chaque numéro est excellent et constitue une documentation de premier order que j'utilise pour mes leçons d'histoire et de géographie."<sup>178</sup> Paul Boisseleau (Vendée), a student, described how *Pilote* figured into his classroom: one day, "quant à ma grande stupéfaction, le professeur sortit le pilotorama expliquant la construction d'une cathédrale."<sup>179</sup> Willy Stelzou (Belgium), another student, gushed: "Grâce au journal formidable qu'est 'Pilote', les murs de ma chambre sont devenus les pages d'un immense manuel d'histoire. En effet, vos Pilotoramas me transportent chaque semaine, soit à Waterloo, Austerlitz, Athènes, Yorktown, etc., sans oublier que, grâce à vous, j'ai pu voguer sur les galères du roi, assister à la construction d'une pyramide, suivre les courses de chars au Cirque Maxime et les tournois de chevaliers. Notre professeur de latin était enthousiasmé en voyant les légions romaines se ranger en ordre de bataille. Bravo 'Pilote' !" <sup>180</sup> Bruno Uagula (Doubs) related a similar experience: "Permettez-moi de vous signaler que nous utilisons souvent, en classe, certains documents contenus dans votre journal. Les Pilotoramas sur la construction des Pyramides, sur les légions romaines, les Jeux Olympiques, Carthage nous ont en particulier aidés efficacement dans l'illustration de nos leçons d'Histoire."<sup>181</sup> Jean-Marie Chabin (Loiret) recounted with equal pride how his history professor tacked several Pilotoramas up on the classroom wall.<sup>182</sup> In addition, several students communicated that *Pilote* had helped them in their exams. Alain Deseine (Seine) remembered: "Quelques jours après avoir lu l'article 'Alésia', dans le no. 13 de 'Pilote', j'ai eu ma composition d'histoire dont une des deux questions avait pour sujet 'Alésia'. J'ai eu ainsi la

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pleasure and my wife, who is also a literature teacher and who echoes my voice in this note, reads it as well. To say that I frequently use the 'Pilotoramas' in my classroom would be meager praise indeed [...]."

<sup>178</sup> *Pilote* 87/2. Translation: "Each week, with regularity, I read your illustrated magazine 'Pilote,' which I particularly enjoy and which keenly interests the students in my class. The pilotorama that you publish in each issue is excellent and constitutes research of the first order that I use in my history and geography lessons."

<sup>179</sup> *Pilote* 82/2. Translation: "much to my great surprise, the teacher pulled out the pilotorama explaining the construction of a cathedral."

<sup>180</sup> *Pilote* 7/2. Translation: "Thanks to the terrific magazine that is 'Pilote,' the walls of my bedroom have become the pages of an immense history manual. In fact, your Pilotoramas transport me each week to either Waterloo, Austerlitz, Athens, Yorktown, etc., without forgetting that, thanks to you, I was able to sail on the king's ships, attend the construction of a Pyramid, follow the car races at the Maxime Circus and the knights' tournaments. Our Latin teacher was so enthused to see the Roman legions line up in battle order. Bravo 'Pilote'!"

<sup>181</sup> *Pilote* 58/2. Translation: "Permit me to point out to you that we often use certain of your magazine's documents in class. The Pilotoramas on the construction of the Pyramids, on the Roman legions, on the Olympic Games, on Carthage were particularly helpful in illustrating our history lessons."

<sup>182</sup> *Pilote* 70/2.

possibilité de mettre beaucoup plus de précisions et d'obtenir une meilleure note."<sup>183</sup> Two letters in particular capture what many readers, young and old, expressed in hundreds of letters sent to *Pilote* staff. P. Duray related: "Voilà déjà bientôt trois mois que je suis devenu un lecteur assidu de 'Pilote', jamais un journal de jeunes ne m'avait tant intéressé. Si le vôtre m'a tant intéressé, je crois surtout que c'est parce que 'Pilote' est un journal *d'information*."<sup>184</sup> Chantal Discry, a young Belgian girl, similarly wrote: "Je suis une vieille lectrice Belge de 'Pilote' puisque j'achète tous les numéros depuis la parution du journal. Je voudrais vous dire que 'Pilote' est un journal formidable et instructif et que je ne peux plus m'en passer. J'y trouve des articles très intéressants qui s'adaptent à tous les goûts. Les filles y trouvent aussi de quoi les satisfaire, et, si elles ne s'intéressent pas aux sport, il leur reste les pilotoramas, les jeux, les récits historiques et scientifiques, les reportages d'actualité."<sup>185</sup>

While *Pilote* did in part approximate the journalistic style of the adult press in France at the time, the magazine's large size, educational features, games, and comics largely enabled it to respond to expectations previously established by the popular Belgian imports – and, in some respects, American imports – in the BD market. As Groensteen interestingly points out, the journal *Tintin* had been tacitly targeting an audience of all ages for years, as evidenced by its much-quoted tagline, the journal for readers "de 7 à 77 ans."<sup>186</sup> In addition, both *Tintin* and *Spirou* featured a "pédagogisme"<sup>187</sup> similar to the Pilotormas, and *Tintin* resonated in particular with the 10-14 age group by offering a mix of original comics series and articles on sports, cinema, music, motorcycles, and the like.<sup>188</sup> In the realm of BD, *Pilote*'s bent towards adventure and humor, while constituting a new turn in general for French BD, in fact continued in the tradition of Franquin, a Belgian, whose wildly popular, comical anti-hero Gaston Lagaffe had hit the market in 1957. All in all, Groensteen argues, *Pilote* in many ways strongly resembled its

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<sup>183</sup> *Pilote* 26/2. "A few days after having read the article, 'Alésia,' in the 13th issue of 'Pilote,' I had my history composition, one of whose two questions pertained to the subject 'Alésia.' So I had the possibility of answering with much precision and of obtaining a higher mark."

<sup>184</sup> *Pilote* 34/2. Translation: "I've been a faithful reader of 'Pilote' for three months now, [and] never has a kids' magazine interested me so much. If yours has interested me this much, I believe above all that it is because 'Pilote' is a magazine of *information*."

<sup>185</sup> *Pilote* 80/2. Translation: "I am a longtime reader of 'Pilote' from Belgium, since I have purchased all the issues since the magazine's debut. I would like to tell you that 'Pilote' is a terrific and instructive magazine and that I can't pass it up. I find in it very interesting articles that appeal to all tastes. Girls can also find something that pleases them in 'Pilote,' and, if they are not interested in sports, they have the pilotoramas, the games, the historical and scientific accounts, the news articles."

<sup>186</sup> Groensteen *Astérix* 142. Translation: "from 7 to 77 years old."

<sup>187</sup> Pierre 102.

<sup>188</sup> Groensteen *Astérix* 138.

predecessors and its competitors, appearing in the early years as "un journal assez classique, qui emprunt[ait] ses auteurs et ses rubriques à des précédents belges (*Tintin*, *Spirou* et la *Libre Junior*), britannique (*Eagle*) et français (*Record*)."<sup>189</sup>

Yet over the years *Pilote* the magazine (and *Pilote* the business operation) managed to set itself apart from its competitors. By the eleventh issue, the magazine's circulation was strong at 235,000 copies.<sup>190</sup> By 1960, *Pilote* was still selling a comfortable 125,000 copies per week.<sup>191</sup> Charlier, co-founder and a future co-editor of the journal, claims that *Pilote* was the only journal at the time that would even consider publishing his own interview with Neil Armstrong or the sports column featuring tips from the soccer star Kopa.<sup>192</sup> In addition, *Pilote* was the first journal not only to turn its illustrators into household names, but to secure widespread recognition for its *scénaristes* as well.<sup>193</sup> By attributing comics series to both artists and writers, and by drawing attention to the comics format itself with the successful weekly column by Remo Forlani on *bande dessinée* greats, *Pilote* served an important legitimizing function in the eyes of creators and future creators as well as in the eyes of potential (adult) readers somewhat ashamed of their patronage of the popular children's press.<sup>194</sup> *Pilote's* extensive coverage of cinema, radio, and television personalities also attracted a segment of the French population much less interested, if at all, in karting, model airplanes, maritime codes, professional athletes, or the D.C. 8.

A key to *Pilote's* continued success, despite its serious financial woes by December 1960, was its ability to reinvent itself. Uderzo discussed the difficulties of pleasing an adolescent audience in an interview with Patrick Gaumer: "L'idée de lancer un nouveau journal était difficile parce qu'on s'adressait à une clientèle très jeune, mais qui évoluait constamment ; parce

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<sup>189</sup> Groensteen *Astérix* 155. Translation: "a somewhat classic magazine that borrowed authors and columns from the Belgians (*Tintin*, *Spirou* and *Libre Junior*), the British (*Eagle*) and the French (*Record*)."

<sup>190</sup> "'Pilote' est content," *Pilote* 12 (1960), 2.

<sup>191</sup> Ory *Gosciny* 177.

<sup>192</sup> Gaumer 15.

<sup>193</sup> Groensteen *Astérix* 166. The following from Couperie and Horn, two pioneers in the field, remains a classic example of the rampant oversight paid to writers in general: "Uderzo, who was already the creator of the Redskin Oompah-Pah, is also the author of the only good contemporary air-adventure strip, 'Michel Tanguy' [...]." See Couperie et. al. 123. Gosciny, in fact, wrote the script for "Oompah-pah" and Charlier authored "Michel Tanguy." Uderzo illustrated both.

<sup>194</sup> An interesting letter to the editor reveals this tendency. Marianne Van Eycken (Belgium) wrote: " Je m'amuse énormément à la lecture de vos articles, et surtout en lisant 'Nicolas', petit chef-d'œuvre d'humour et d'observation qui me rappelle de bons souvenirs de lycée absolument 'terribles' ! Et croyez-moi, même des amis et mes parents y prennent tous intérêt, malgré une réticence tout extérieure" (55/2). Translation: "I am enormously entertained when reading your articles, and above all in reading 'Nicolas,' that small masterpiece of humor and observation that brings back good memories of absolutely 'terrible' days at school! And believe me, even my friends and parents are interested in *Pilote*, despite their exterior reticence."

qu'un gamin de quatorze ans se trouvait déshonoré de lire un journal pour enfants. Il nous fallait renouveler constamment notre clientèle et ce n'était pas un travail toujours facile."<sup>195</sup> Guy Vidal, a future editor of the magazine, attributed *Pilote's* tenacity in the market during the Charlier-Goscinny years<sup>196</sup> to its ability "d'évoluer, de changer, d'innover."<sup>197</sup> The "yéyé" fiasco of 1963 aptly illustrates his point. With the rising popularity among adolescents of the journal *Salut les copains*, a companion piece to the radio show of the same name on Radio-Luxembourg competitor Europe 1, *Pilote* attempted as well to capitalize on the new teen craze. *Pilote* devoted more of its pages – and even cover space – to teen music idols like Johnny Hallyday, Sylvie Vartan, Sheila, and Françoise Hardy and less to the *rubriques* that long-standing readers expected to encounter in *Pilote* each week. Readership plummeted. Dargaud pulled the plug on Marcel Bisiaux, *Pilote's* editor at the time, and installed Charlier and a reluctant Goscinny in his place at the magazine's helm. Goscinny blamed the reader attrition on "routine," stating that "il faut toujours surprendre le lecteur," which, in his mind, meant delivering new informational content and rotating in new, original BD.<sup>198</sup> Under Charlier and Goscinny's (re)direction, *Pilote* introduced new comics series, increased the number of articles, and organized a new round of contests to boost participation and readership. Pascal Ory, Goscinny's most recent biographer, claims that, because *Pilote* was forced to reengineer itself so many times in its early years, the magazine was in fact born three times between 1959 and 1963: in 1959, "pour ses lecteurs, ceux qui feront le succès initial d'*Astérix*;" in 1960, when Dargaud took over; and then again in 1963, when Charlier and Goscinny refocused the magazine on what it did best: informational articles and *bande dessinée*.<sup>199</sup>

### **Community-Building Through *Pilote***

As we have seen, *Pilote's* initial readership consisted not solely of 14-year-old boys. Their sisters, mothers, grandmothers, teachers, and female contemporaries, along with men of all ages, also read *Pilote*, even if they did not purchase copies of the magazine themselves. If Ory's

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<sup>195</sup> Gaumer 48. Translation: "The idea to launch a new magazine was difficult because we were addressing a very young audience that was constantly evolving; because a 14-year-old kid would feel ashamed to read a magazine for kids. We had to constantly reestablish our audience and that wasn't always an easy job."

<sup>196</sup> Charlier and Goscinny served as joint editors-in-chief of *Pilote* from 1963 to 1968.

<sup>197</sup> Gaumer 96. Translation: "to evolve, to change, to innovate."

<sup>198</sup> Gaumer 26. Jean Donguès attributed the financial crisis to the high cost of securing exclusives with celebrities like Roger Rivière. See Gaumer 71. Translation: "you have to always surprise the reader."

<sup>199</sup> Ory Goscinny 179. Translation: "for its readers, those who would ensure the initial success of '*Astérix*.'"

hypothesis can be trusted, early readers were responsible in part<sup>200</sup> for the success of the first edition of "Astérix" in album format, which in turn helped launch the series as a fetish brand. Yet how did *Pilote* cultivate such a vast, faithful, and diverse community of readers? This section will argue that *Pilote* built reader loyalty by promoting magazine membership through ownership of the famed "Carnets de bord;" by hosting on-going reader contests; through public appearances; by encouraging and sanctioning the formation of reader clubs; by treating its predominantly adolescent readers as adults, or "les prendre au sérieux;"<sup>201</sup> and by cultivating a spirit of *ouverture* through editorial tone.

Clauteaux's idea of offering regular readers of *Pilote* the opportunity to earn "Carnets de bord" with membership benefits quickly became a huge success among the journal's target market: adolescent boys (and girls).<sup>202</sup> Similar in concept to maintaining a travel log or collecting stamps in a passport, the Carnet de bord consisted of a hardcover, *Pilote*-branded notebook featuring the holder's name, nationality, date of birth, address, and unique identification number, along with blank pages for registering points earned through contests and for recording stamps, celebrity autographs, and event notes. In addition, *Pilote* arranged for a host of well-respected members of the sports, entertainment, science, and arts communities to serve as Carnet de bord sponsors. The list of "parrains" and "marraines" included Colette Duval, a record-breaking parachutist; the rugbyman Michel Vannier; Roberto Benzi, a 21-year-old maestro; Jean Rostand, a biologist and member of the elite Académie française; Fernandel, a popular singer and actor; Bertrand Flornoy, president of the Explorer's Club; the much-respected Josephine Baker; Dr. Méry, president of "Les Amis des Bêtes;" cycling star Louison Bobet; the writer Gilbert Cesbron; Claude Luter, a clarinetist; the illusionist Michel Seldow; Formula 1 racecar driver Maurice Trintignant; Pierre Lazareff, director of *France-Soir*; the illustrator Jacques Faizant; Raymond Kopa, the soccer star; and Jean Grandmougin, an editorialist at Radio-Luxembourg. On their applications, readers selected the sponsor of their choice, who then endorsed their Carnets. To apply, readers were required to remit the issue numbers from 10 consecutive magazines, plus fill out a questionnaire on their general likes and dislikes. In return for providing such valuable reader data to the editorial and marketing staff at *Pilote*, Carnet-holders could

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<sup>200</sup> Gaumer (51) argues that radio programs featuring Astérix and company also helped create a thriving market for the first "Astérix" album. This paper will discuss the role of marketing and advertising later in the chapter.

<sup>201</sup> Translation: "taking them seriously."

<sup>202</sup> The idea of a membership "visa" was not a new one at the time. Clauteaux freely admitted that he was inspired by Jaboune's "carte" idea for *Benjamin*. See Gaumer 54.

enter members-only contests to win significant prizes, attend a variety of venues and events throughout France at reduced entrance costs, form *Pilote* reader clubs, and perhaps even see their names or photographs published on the pages of the magazine.

In the initial issues of *Pilote*, the editorial staff promoted the benefits of membership seemingly at every opportunity, explaining the somewhat cumbersome process of obtaining Carnets de bord within detailed letters from Jean Donguès, the editor in charge of Carnet promotion and processing. With the publication of the tenth issue, applications began streaming in.<sup>203</sup> Donguès cheerfully reported progress in issue no. 13: "Nous en avons reçu un nombre tel qu'il nous a été impossible de les compter. Il y en a, en tout cas, plus de dix mille et le rythme ne se ralentit pas."<sup>204</sup> By issue no. 28, he reported: "L'abondance du courrier ne nous permet pas de le dépouiller aussi rapidement que nous le souhaiterions [...]. Soyons franc, ce retard provient avant tout du succès de l'opération-carnet de bord qui a dépassé nos propres espérances ! et n'avez-vous pas été des milliers à demander *tous ensemble, en même temps* notre questionnaire ?"<sup>205</sup> In response to letters demanding their Carnet-related prizes, Donguès wrote the following three issues later: "Si vous ne recevez pas immédiatement vos vignettes, ne vous impatientez surtout pas : il ne s'agit pas d'un oubli mais tout simplement d'un retard dû à l'abondance de notre courrier."<sup>206</sup>

As early as issue no. 7, an editor's note had appeared in response to Belgian readers' fears that membership might exclude them: "À tous ceux, inquiets et inquiètes, qui demandent si les jeunes Belges (garçons et filles) peuvent obtenir un 'Carnet de bord' et participer à nos épreuves du 'Brevet de Pilote', nous répondons : 'bien sûr !'"<sup>207</sup> Other letters to the editor similarly revealed that *Pilote's* Carnet-holders were not all boys. Denise Grimotisch (Jura) wrote in to ask: "Avez-vous beaucoup de jeunes filles de 15 à 16 ans qui tiennent à avoir leur 'Carnet de bord', comme

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<sup>203</sup> See the photograph of Jean Donguès and Pierre Gallois seated at a desk laden with new Carnets de bord in Gaumer (71) to get a sense of the magnitude of the response.

<sup>204</sup> *Pilote* 13/30. Translation: "We have received so many that it was impossible to count them. In any case, there are more than 10,000 and the pace is not slowing down."

<sup>205</sup> *Pilote* 28/31. Translation: "The abundance of mail has not permitted us to process everything as quickly as we would have wished [...] To be honest, the delay above all stems from the success of our carnet de bord operation, which has surpassed even our own expectations! and were there not thousands of you who requested our questionnaire *all together and at the same time?*"

<sup>206</sup> *Pilote* 31/31. Translation: "If you have not immediately received your prize, above all be patient: we haven't forgotten; it's simply a delay due to the abundance of our mail."

<sup>207</sup> *Pilote* 7/31. Translation: "To all of the worried boys and girls who have asked if young Belgians (boys and girls) can obtain a 'Carnet de bord' and participate in our 'Brevet de Pilote' competitions, we respond: 'but of course!'"

moi ? J'ai peur d'être la plus âgée de tout le groupe...",<sup>208</sup> to which the editor replied, "Les lectrices de votre âge sont plus nombreuses que vous ne le pensez."<sup>209</sup> In a later issue, Anne-Marie Giacchino (Seine) informed *Pilote* staff in a letter that her dog had eaten all her issue numbers, but that she was eager to start a new collection in order to apply for her own Carnet.<sup>210</sup>

In issue no. 52, Donguès triumphantly reported having just issued the 16,000th Carnet de bord. The article even named and pictured the 15,998th, 15,999th, 16,001st, and 16,002nd "Pilotes" to receive their Carnets, among them the two girls Liliane Spiner and Marie-Pierre-Yvonne-Jeanne Porte.<sup>211</sup> An editor's note in the sixty-sixth issue of *Pilote* established firm expectations for the processing of all new Carnets: "Quel succès ils remportent, ces fameux Carnets de Bord ! Et combien vous êtes nombreux à nous les réclamer... Oui, nous avons un peu de retard et nous vous demandons de nous accorder un délai d'un mois pour satisfaire toutes vos demandes. A vous tous, merci."<sup>212</sup> Perhaps in an attempt to decrease the overall number of applications to keep the process manageable, the editorial staff decided with issue no. 69 to make Carnets de bord available only to those who had subscribed to the magazine for one year; reader backlash proved so strong that they rescinded the new requirement by issue no. 88. By issue no. 95, Donguès declared the 23,000th Carnet de bord issued, and the section of the magazine devoted to membership benefits became a regular feature with a larger header and a standardized layout.

*Pilote* maintained both financial support and high levels of reader participation through extensive "concours" sponsored by brands such as ESSO, Prior ("La Grande biscotterie française"), Disques Philips, Kelton watches, Orangina, Renault, and Kodak. Carnet-holders were also regularly invited to participate in a series of contests open only to them. Winners received points towards "brevets" for their notebooks as well as big- and small-ticket items, such as all-expenses-paid (international) vacations for the whole family, actual go-karts, model cars, records, watches, maps, pens, and free subscriptions to *Pilote*. Winners were also honored to see their names and hometowns listed in *Pilote*, since nearly all winner notification took place

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<sup>208</sup> *Pilote* 10/2. Translation: "Do you have many young girls between the ages of 15 and 16 who wish to have their 'Carnet de bord,' like I do? I'm afraid that I'm the oldest of all the group...."

<sup>209</sup> *Pilote* 10/2. Translation: "Our female readers of your age are more numerous than you think."

<sup>210</sup> *Pilote* 54/2.

<sup>211</sup> *Pilote* 52/31.

<sup>212</sup> *Pilote* 66/2. Translation: "What a success they have been, these famous Carnets de Bord! And how numerous you have been to request them... Yes, we are a little behind and we ask that you allow for a delay of one month to fulfill your requests. We thank you all."

through the pages of the magazine. Notable early campaigns included the "Chasse-Tampon" contest, in which readers were asked to amass as many vendor stamps and seals as possible within a notebook or two, much along the lines of letterboxing; the "Concours Renault-Pilote," which selected Jean-Claude Pietra out of a pool of 50,000 candidates,<sup>213</sup> each vying for the top prize of an actual Dauphine '61; contests revolving around holiday themes, animals, photographs, and handicrafts; and the much more technical series of contests open to Carnet-holding members only on subjects ranging from maritime right-of-way rules and insects to professional cycling, soccer, and aviation.

*Pilote* generated buzz for the magazine, attracted new readers, and rewarded its faithful readers through a series of highly publicized appearances and special events. In early 1960, representatives of the magazine met with 100 Carnet-holders at the Mestre and Blatgé stores in Paris to get their "franche opinion" of what they liked and did not like about *Pilote*.<sup>214</sup> Later that year, more than 1,200 students of the Groupe scolaire de la rue Saint-Ferdinand in Paris gathered with *Pilote* one Sunday for a day of festivities and prizes (the day's "lauréats" included, it is worth noting, three girls as well as three boys). Also in 1960, in collaboration with l'Alsacienne-Biscuit, *Pilote* hosted an aviation event in Lorient that included a magazine-signing ceremony, a rally, a concert, games, and on-site interviews with Colette Duval, Léon Biancotto, the chevalier d'Orgeix, and other Carnet de bord sponsors. *Pilote* even arranged for Annie Cordy to sign Carnets at La Gringnotière, "le premier cabaret des jeunes," in Paris on December 15, 1960.<sup>215</sup> *Pilote* appeared as well on the Radio-Télévision Française Christmas special broadcast entirely from the SNCF train en route between Paris and Lille.<sup>216</sup> To launch its "Guide des jeunes" contest, which asked readers to create a kids' version of the Michelin Guide while on summer holiday, Jean Hébrard, Denis Lefèvre-Toussaint, and Goscinny travelled north to Herblay to talk to young residents about what made their town worthy of mention. Most *Pilote*-sponsored events received ample coverage in the pages of the magazine, replete with photographs showing crowds of proud young "Pilotes" enjoying themselves at events sponsored by "their" magazine. By making key staff accessible to readers, and even occasionally opening up their Paris studios and

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<sup>213</sup> *Pilote* 66/2.

<sup>214</sup> *Pilote* 16/31.

<sup>215</sup> *Pilote* 60/2.

<sup>216</sup> *Pilote* 63/14.

the studios of Radio-Luxembourg for guided tours, *Pilote* attempted to satisfy its fanbase by making them feel part of a privileged community already hundreds of thousands strong.

Readers of *Pilote* began organizing themselves into clubs somewhat spontaneously within the first few months of the magazine's launch. After the editorial staff published a letter from "Le Club des Amis de 'Pilote'" in Tours, other clubs around France began to make themselves known to the magazine. In issue no. 19, Claude Mayer (Bas-Rhin), writing on behalf of his club, "Les Pilotes de l'Espace," received this published response: "Nous recevons beaucoup de lettres nous annonçant la création spontanée de clubs 'Pilote' dans toute la France. Nous allons bientôt organiser ces clubs, et nous vous donnerons toutes les instructions à ce sujet."<sup>217</sup> In the next issue, the magazine began devoting space to club activities and announcements. Within five months of *Pilote's* debut, the magazine had announced the formation of nearly 100 clubs<sup>218</sup> and adopted a more encouraging tone towards reader self-organization: "un peu partout en France, des Clubs naissent qui vont permettre l'établissement de solides liens d'amitié (ou le raffermissement des liens existants) non seulement entre vous, *Pilote*, et nous, *Pilote*, mais aussi entre Clubs, c'est-à-dire entre Pilotes. Si vous ne faites pas encore partie d'un Club, n'hésitez pas, où que vous soyez, en Bretagne, à Paris, sur la Côte d'Azur, en Belgique ou ailleurs, oui, n'hésitez pas à former un Club avec vos camarades de classe ou de jeu, vos frères, vos cousins, vos voisins !"<sup>219</sup> In time for Mother's Day 1960, *Pilote* announced a "grande competition interclub" to encourage friendly competition and communication between members. In issue no. 33, Donguès recounted how *Pilote* ceremoniously marked the formation of the 100th club and even attended one of its meetings: "le 'Club 100', tout bonnement, c'est notre centième club 'Pilote'. Eh oui ! [...] dans toute la France, des centaines de lecteurs devenus des amis, se rassemble[nt] spontanément pour commenter le dernier numéro (le critiquer amicalement, aussi, bien sûr), déjouer en commun les pièges des mots croisés et des enquêtes de Robillard, pour 'décortiquer' les détails du Pilotorama ou résoudre les problèmes des épreuves du

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<sup>217</sup> *Pilote* 19/2. Translation: "We often receive letters announcing the spontaneous creation of 'Pilote' clubs all around France. Soon we are going to organize the clubs and will give you all further instructions on the subject."

<sup>218</sup> *Pilote* 24/31.

<sup>219</sup> *Pilote* 23/31. Translation: "all around France, Clubs are springing up that will permit the establishment of solid ties of friendship (or the strengthening of existing ties) not only between you, *Pilote*, and us, *Pilote*, but also between Clubs, that is to say, between Pilotes. If you are not already part of a Club, hesitate no longer, wherever you are, in Brittany, in Paris, on the French Riviera, in Belgium or elsewhere, yes, don't hesitate to form a Club with your schoolmates or playmates, your brothers, your cousins, your neighbors!"

Carnet de Bord. Cent clubs officiellement déclarés, c'est pour nous une étape, en même temps qu'une grande joie et qu'un immense encouragement [...]."<sup>220</sup>

By the end of 1960, Donguès had issued official club statutes, to which club members were bound by signature. Clubs were to be open to boys and girls aged eight to 18; the cabinet had to consist of a president and five officers, and all Carnet-holders; elected positions were to include a "Charge des relations extérieures," a "historiographe du club," and a "maître de cérémonies."<sup>221</sup> Total club membership could not fall below seven; all clubs were to have unique names, beginning with "Club Pilote de...;" new clubs were required to declare themselves formally to *Pilote* by mail; and all officers had to sign and submit *Pilote's* "engagement moral," which in part stated: "Nous soussignés, futurs Président et Membres du bureau d'un Club Pilote, avons décidé de fonder ce club afin de faire la preuve de nos qualités de jeunes, à savoir, en particulier : le dynamisme, la joie de vivre, et de nous distraire tout en instruisant – qualités chères à notre journal – afin également de mieux connaître tous ceux qui comme nous lisent 'Pilote'."<sup>222</sup> Upon receiving the signed agreement, *Pilote*, in turn, would issue each club with documentation on possible club activities as well as official club paraphernalia. Clubs were then required to send quarterly updates by mail to *Pilote* staff reporting club developments and accomplishments.

Once *Pilote* became actively involved in club oversight, enthusiasm among readers, while strong in some quarters, appeared to wane in others. Clubs were frequently plagued with logistical complications, such as recruiting enough members, finding suitable places to meet, and ensuring that everyone attended regularly. A few clubs, however, saw their accomplishments published and much lauded within the pages of *Pilote*. Much to the delight of *Pilote* staff, "L'Internationales Club 'Pilote'" had created its own magazine featuring articles on cars, travel, aviation, sports, spelunking, movies, and music.<sup>223</sup> "Le Club 'Pilote' des Écureuils de Ligny-en-

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<sup>220</sup> *Pilote* 33/31. Translation: "the 'Club 100,' quite simply, is our 100th 'Pilote' club. Oh yes! [...] all around France, hundreds of readers who have become friends gather spontaneously to talk about the most recent issue (and to criticize it gently as well, of course), to solve together the puzzles in the crosswords and Robillard's investigations, to dissect the details of the Pilotorama or answer the questions in the Carnet de Bord competitions. 100 clubs officially declared is for us an accomplishment as well as a great joy and an immense encouragement [...]."

<sup>221</sup> Translation: "officer of public relations," a "club historiographer," and a "master of ceremonies."

<sup>222</sup> *Pilote* 49/30. Translation: "We, the undersigned, future President and Members of a Club Pilote, have decided to found our club in order to demonstrate our qualities as youth, to wit: enthusiasm, a zest for life, and [an eagerness] to have fun while learning and leading by example – all qualities dear to our magazine – in order as well to know better and understand all of those who, like we do, read 'Pilote'."

<sup>223</sup> *Pilote* 61/2.

Barrois" published its second journal issue by January 1961. In its quarterly report to *Pilote*, "Le Club 'Pilote' de la Sixième Espérance" stated that its members were busy collecting postcards, empty matchboxes, and rare stones.<sup>224</sup> The more ambitious "Le Club 'Pilote' 'Les Formidables'" visited the magazine's Paris studios in person to report their activities: "réunions régulières chaque jeudi, séance de cinéma et ombres chinoises, création d'un journal, formation d'une équipe de football, etc."<sup>225</sup> Within a year and a half of *Pilote's* existence, the more established clubs seemed to be thriving and more letters appeared from readers in search of clubs to join or fellow officers with whom to form clubs.

From its very first issue, *Pilote* cultivated a spirit of *ouverture* with its target market by treating its young readers with respect, or "les prendre au sérieux." In his first letter to readers, editor François Clauteaux set a tone of (moral) expectation that would persist throughout the magazine's early years:

Pourquoi "Pilote" ? Oh ! c'est bien simple. Un pilote, c'est celui qui conduit les autres. Souvent, il le fait par l'intermédiaire d'une machine : auto, avion, bateau, locomotive. Parfois, il passe le premier en faisant le chemin : c'est le guide, le chef de caravane, le passeur. Souvent il donne les consignes, il commande, il dirige comme le capitaine, le chef d'équipe ou le chef de chantier. Pour être un vrai pilote, il faut d'abord des connaissances. Mais il faut également beaucoup de travail et beaucoup de courage et notre souhait, c'est que vous soyez, avec nous, de vrais pilotes ; c'est pour cela que nous voulons avant tout, VOUS PRENDRE AU SERIEUX. [...] Mais ce n'est pas tout : je sais que vous brûlez d'envie de devenir des vrais pilotes. Alors, je vous donne rendez-vous à la page 31 – votre page. Nous avons tant de projets à vous proposer ! Mon seul souhait est que vous soyez fiers de lire "PILOTE" – le vrai journal fait pour vous – comme je suis fier, moi aussi, d'être votre rédacteur en chef. – François Clauteaux.<sup>226</sup>

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<sup>224</sup> *Pilote* 67/2.

<sup>225</sup> *Pilote* 72/2. Translation: "regular meetings each Thursday, a night at the movie theater, a puppet show, the creation of a magazine, the formation of a soccer team, etc."

<sup>226</sup> *Pilote* 1/2. Translation: "Why 'Pilote'?' It's simple. A pilot is someone who directs others. Often, he does it using a machine – a car, an airplane, a ship, a train – as an intermediary. Sometimes, he forges the path before others as the guide, the head of the caravan, the leader. At other times, he gives orders, he commands, he directs like the captain of a ship, the captain of a team, or the general contractor. To be a true pilot, you have to acquire knowledge. But hard work and lots of courage are also necessary, and our wish is that you become true pilots like we are; for this reason, we want, above all, to TAKE YOU SERIOUSLY [...] But that's not all: I know that you're burning with desire to become true pilots. So I've given you a rendez-vous on page 31 – your page. We have so many projects in

The notion that *Pilote* belonged in part to the readers themselves surfaced more than once in reader mail, and decisions and actions on the part of the editorial staff reinforced the idea that readers had a say in the direction of "their" magazine. Jean Solé, an early Carnet-holder who later joined the staff at *Pilote* as an illustrator, remembers the magazine fondly: "*Pilote* occupe une place essentielle dans ma vie, tant par son côté formateur, source de plaisirs, durant mes jeunes années, que du point de vue professionnel. *Pilote*, c'est mon journal, l'arbre qui continue de trôner au milieu de mon jardin."<sup>227</sup> Overall, the staff appeared quick to consider reader suggestions and to ask other readers for their input. The forum-type atmosphere established from the beginning opened the door to prolific reader commentary, which made up the bulk of the letters to the editor in the first several years of *Pilote*'s existence. In response to reader requests for a column on gymnastics, more content for girls, and features on music and painting, Claudeaux responded: "Je pose la question à tous les Pilotes : que pensez-vous [...] ?",<sup>228</sup> and "Le débat est ouvert. Qu'en pensent nos lecteurs ?"<sup>229</sup> In issue no. 15, J.-P. Bernard (Haute-Savoie) requested that *Pilote* publish his own humorous drawings, which he had enclosed with his letter. The magazine declined, responding "peut-être qu'un jour, nous passerons vos dessins dans *Pilote* !"<sup>230</sup>; just a year later, *Pilote* had indeed introduced an ongoing contest for the best reader illustrations, with winning drawings published and authors named.<sup>231</sup> When letters to the editor repeatedly requested more information on karting, the editorial staff responded by publishing how-to articles and information on karting clubs and events. *Pilote* frequently accepted reader suggestions for future Pilotoramas; ideas for the centerfolds depicting the U.S. Civil War, the Mongols, the oceanliner "France," coal mines, the port city of Avers, and many others appeared to have originated in reader letters.<sup>232</sup> Readers also responded to one another in their letters to *Pilote*. Contentious topics included *Pilote*'s campaign to stop "la chasse à courre,"<sup>233</sup> which solicited heated letters both for and against the magazine's and other readers' positions; whether

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store for you. My sole wish is that you are proud to read 'PILOTE' – the magazine created especially for you – as I am proud as well to be your editor-in-chief. – François Claudeaux."

<sup>227</sup> Interview with Jean Solé in Gaumer 169; last emphasis added. Translation: "*Pilote* occupies an essential place in my life, as much for its formative influence as a source of pleasure during my younger years as for its place in my professional life. *Pilote* is my magazine, the tree that occupies a place of prominence in the middle of my garden."

<sup>228</sup> *Pilote* 3/31. Translation: "I put the question to all our Pilotes: what do you think?"

<sup>229</sup> *Pilote* 34/2. Translation: "The debate is open. What do our readers think?"

<sup>230</sup> Translation: "maybe one day we'll publish your drawings in *Pilote*!"

<sup>231</sup> *Pilote* showcased reader illustrations on set topics in its column, "Nos dessinateurs font école !" The column first appeared in issue no. 65.

<sup>232</sup> *Pilote* 21/2; 27/2; 31/2; 82/2.

<sup>233</sup> Translation: "fox and other game hunting (for pleasure)."

the answer key to the game section should be published in the same issue; whether Parisian "Pilotes" had a distinct advantage over their compatriots in the provinces in *Pilote* contests; and whether center stapling would help or hinder the reading – and dismemberment, since many readers affixed the Pilotoramas to their walls – of *Pilote*. Throughout, the editorial staff delivered praise, accepted criticism, and even offered gentle rebuke in an encouraging, mentoring way that most likely played a key role in fostering a strong sense of community among its hundreds of thousands of weekly readers.

### **"Astérix" Steals Ahead: Marketing and Advertising the Brand**

If we can accurately gauge reader response and reception through staff-selected and published reader mail,<sup>234</sup> mentions of the magazine's original *bandes dessinées* appeared relatively infrequently in letters to the editor during the early 1960s. As we have seen, the magazine's diverse early readers appeared to appreciate the magazine most for its articles and for its Pilotoramas. How, then, did *Pilote* evolve from an informational magazine for adolescents into the "journal d'Astérix et d'Obélix" in the space of just 300 issues? This section argues that the cross-promotion of "Astérix" episodes on the radio, the publication of early "Astérix" adventures in hardcover album format, and prolific merchandising featuring "Astérix" character likenesses catapulted the brand head and shoulders above its competitors both in *Pilote* and in the other magazines popular at the time. Without the help of concerted marketing and advertising, Astérix le Gaulois may well have remained a cult figure popular with only a small segment of the mainstream French public.

*Pilote* placed John Donguès in charge of much more than just Carnet de bord applications. One of his primary marketing roles consisted of turning the magazine's "principaux personnages"<sup>235</sup> into household names, or at least introducing them to a wider commercial

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<sup>234</sup> Without systematically analyzing all letters received by *Pilote* during the time period studied, we must make allowances for editorial decisions in selecting to publish some reader letters over others. The seeming importance among readers of certain issues may well appear distorted in the absence of triangulating data. On the other hand, however, the editorial function does reveal which issues the staff at *Pilote* particularly wished to showcase. The publication, for instance, of numerous letters pointing out presumed errors gave *Pilote* the chance to defend its documentation (usually in a gentle, yet condescending tone of voice), which in turn only established the magazine further as a definitive source of reliable information on all subjects, a quality much prized by *Pilote* readers in general. The publication of letters to the editor in praise of "Astérix," and especially the publication of reader drawings of "Astérix" characters, in turn may have focused reader attention on the strip and thus increased its visibility and popularity.

<sup>235</sup> Translation: "main characters."

audience. As Donguès later recounted to Gaumer, he had had to start from scratch in the case of "Astérix." *Le petit Gaulois* "ne connaissait pas [...] les faveurs du public" in the early 1960s.<sup>236</sup> Radio-Luxembourg became the first – and perhaps the most significant<sup>237</sup> – marketing apparatus employed in the early years to promote "Astérix" and its fellow star series, "Les Aventures de Michel Tanguy" and "Le Démon des Caraïbes." Radio-Luxembourg broadcast the first adaptation, called *Ohé ! Pilote*, of *Pilote's bandes originales* on October 6, 1960, with "les aventures d'Astérix et Obélix" interpreted by Guy Pierauld, Albert Augier, Jean Gold, Jean Mauvais, Paul Préboist, and Claude Perrin.<sup>238</sup> To promote the show and drive *Pilote* readers to Radio-Luxembourg, flyers appeared inside the magazine each week with show times and promotional blurbs. In addition, Radio-Luxembourg subsequently issued a recorded accompaniment to the "Astérix" portion of the show as a "disque d'adaptation sonore," which *Pilote* heavily advertised on the pages of its magazine in tandem with Radio-Luxembourg's own promotion of it over the airwaves.<sup>239</sup> The relationship between Radio-Luxembourg and *Pilote* remained strong through the first half of the 1960s, and *Pilote's* presence on air continued into the late 1960s. In 1966, for example, France-Inter broadcast an adaptation of the "Astérix" series starring the voices of Roger Carel, Jacques Morel, and Bernard Lavalette *daily* at 12:20 pm.<sup>240</sup> It must be noted, however, that during this same period, "Michel Tanguy" had its own radio show as well, broadcast each Thursday at 1:30 pm, and Radio-Luxembourg had also previously published recorded accompaniments of both the "Michel Tanguy" and "Démon des Caraïbes" series, just as it had in the case of "Astérix."<sup>241</sup> To understand how "Astérix" was able to outpace both series by 1965, we must take into account the commercial success of "Astérix" in album format and the sheer breadth of the merchandising industry that soon arose around its star characters.

Dargaud published the first "Astérix" album in 1961. The idea that *Pilote* faithfuls were responsible for the album's initial commercial success seems plausible, especially in light of Uderzo's insistence that Dargaud released *Astérix le Gaulois* in the absence of any promotional activities whatsoever: "C'est une série qui a fonctionné essentiellement sur le bouche à oreille.

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<sup>236</sup> Gaumer 71. Translation: "was unknown to the public."

<sup>237</sup> Ory Goscinnny 203.

<sup>238</sup> Gaumer 51.

<sup>239</sup> Ory Goscinnny 202.

<sup>240</sup> Gaumer 130.

<sup>241</sup> Duchêne 136.

Dargaud n'a jamais fait la moindre publicité, contrairement à ce que croyaient certains."<sup>242</sup> Since the "Astérix" series had only ever been published in serial format in *Pilote* until then,<sup>243</sup> Dargaud perhaps rightly felt that an initial print run for *Astérix le Gaulois* of 6,000 copies in France and 4,000 copies for the Belgian market was already risky.<sup>244</sup> He issued both the subsequent album, *La serpe d'or* (1962), and the third, *Astérix et les Goths* (1963), at a still cautious 15,000 copies each. *Astérix gladiateur* (1964) and *Le Tour de Gaul* (1965) had initial print runs of 60,000 copies and did well. The "prétirage" of *Astérix et Cléopâtre* (1965), which hit stores at the height of the media buzz surrounding Joseph Mankiewicz's film "Cleopatra" starring Elizabeth Taylor, still only totaled 100,000 copies. *Le Combat des chefs* (1966) quickly sold its initial 400,000 copies. The 400,000 copies released of *Astérix chez les Bretons* (1966) disappeared "en quelques jours,"<sup>245</sup> and an astounding 1.2m copies of *Astérix et les Normands* (1966) were snatched up in a mere two days.<sup>246</sup> "Astérix" had indeed become "la poule aux oeufs d'or de la maison [Dargaud]."<sup>247</sup> Uderzo himself explained the turning point in Astérix's popularity in terms of album sales: "Le grand tournant a eu lieu en 1965, mais on en parlait déjà avant. Dès 1963, on sentait poindre un certain intérêt de la part du public. Les gens que nous connaissions nous disaient : 'Nous aimons bien vos albums, mais nous ne les trouvons pas.'"<sup>248</sup> Likewise, Goscinny confirmed the part that album sales played in creating the frenzy surrounding "Astérix:" "Le premier album, on a dû en vendre à peine 6 000. Seulement, au deuxième, on avait doublé et puis ça a été une progression géométrique. [...] Ce fut ensuite très rapide. Puis il y a eu la grande explosion, cette espèce d'hystérie collective qui date de l'été 1965. Entre-temps, on était arrivé à des tirages conséquents, jusqu'à 300 000, c'était déjà un gros succès. Mais c'est en 1965 que le 'phénomène', comme on dit, est parti'."<sup>249</sup>

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<sup>242</sup> Gaumer 44. Translation: "It's a series that functioned essentially by word of mouth. Dargaud never did the least bit of publicity, contrary to what some people believe."

<sup>243</sup> "Astérix" would leave *Pilote* for good in 1974. Future episodes would be published in the mainstream adult press, including in *Le Monde* and *Le Nouvel Observateur*, if not published solely as albums.

<sup>244</sup> Ory [Goscinny](#) 144.

<sup>245</sup> Translation: "in several days."

<sup>246</sup> Totals of the initial print runs for "Astérix" vary depending on the source; see Duchêne 104-134 and Ory [Goscinny](#) 144.

<sup>247</sup> Ory [Goscinny](#) 185. Translation: "Dargaud's cash cow."

<sup>248</sup> Gaumer 40-43. Translation: "The big turning point came in 1965, but people were already talking about it before then. As early as 1963, we felt a certain interest emerge on the part of the public. People we knew would tell us: 'We really like your albums, but we can't find them anywhere.'"

<sup>249</sup> Guillot et. al. 206. Translation: "We were only able to barely sell 6,000 copies of the first album. With the second album, we doubled the print run and then it became a geometric progression. [...] It all went quickly after that. And then there was the big explosion, the sort of collective hysteria dating from the summer of 1965. Meanwhile, we had

Merchandising constituted the third essential ingredient in the universalization of the "Astérix" brand. Given their backgrounds in advertising, Goscinny and Uderzo well understood the power of branding. Goscinny even joked that he gave his main character a name beginning with "A" for its "avantage indéniable pour les classements alphabétiques des futures encyclopédies de la bande dessinée" – and for its product placement at the front of the rack in bookstores.<sup>250</sup> Édifrance/Édipresse remained in charge of publicity for *Pilote* until October 1962, when Publiart, a Dargaud subsidiary, took over. Already before then, the first Astérix and Obélix action figures fabricated in latex had appeared for sale through *Pilote*, just six months after the magazine's launch. *Pilote* even devoted advertising space throughout the course of 1960 to promoting the toys and frequently gave them away as consolation prizes to contest participants. As the series' popularity grew with the publication of albums, manufacturers realized that Astérix indeed was a "flexible and versatile property."<sup>251</sup> Products associated with Astérix and company included Mallat Triplix erasers, L'Alsacienne biscuits, latex toys by Ex.In.Co., Grimaud games, Staedler colored pencils, Bayard alarm clocks, César masks, Tonimalt chocolate drinks, Delacoste puppets, keychains by Jouets Incassables Modernes, Nemours plastic toys, Vache qui rit cheese, Philips records, Clodrey dolls, Amora drinking glasses, Le Chat laundry detergent, Beurix butter by Coopératives normandes, Voluforme tableware and coat hangers, board games by Jeux Noël, figurines by Goebel, and Dupont d'Isigny candy.<sup>252</sup> By 1967, 83 licenses had been granted to producers to use the likenesses of "Astérix" characters.<sup>253</sup> Uderzo recounted a particularly unpleasant moment in the late 1960s when he encountered a series of billboards in the Paris metro each pitching different products, and all using Astérix to do it. From then on, the series' authors took much more active roles in the process of granting permission to manufacturers to exploit their beloved creations.<sup>254</sup>

The positive effects of the marketing campaigns waged in tandem by *Pilote*, Radio-Luxembourg, Dargaud, and product manufacturers surface in the letters sent to the magazine

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begun releasing significant first print runs, up to 300,000 copies; it was already a huge success. But it was in 1965 that the 'phenomenon,' as they say, took off."

<sup>250</sup> Andrieu xiii. Translation: "undeniable advantage in alphabetical classification within future encyclopedias of *bande dessinée*."

<sup>251</sup> Cathy Bond, "Marketing Focus: Cult followers - Borrowing adored characters, from Asterix to Zebedee, can give products instant appeal," *Marketing* (1995): 20.

<sup>252</sup> See de Choisy et. al.

<sup>253</sup> Coudouy 21.

<sup>254</sup> As retold in Touillier-Feyrabend 367.

during the first few years of its existence. By issue no. 100, we can detect a shift towards self-advertisement of *bande dessinée* within *Pilote's* articles as well as the initial signs of widespread resonance of the "Astérix" series among its readers. From the beginning, however, "Michel Tanguy" occupied a place of prominence around page four of each issue. Until "Astérix" moved to its customary location on the back cover of *Pilote* in issue no. 92, the strip usually appeared on a single page somewhat buried around page 20. Perhaps to advance certain narrative sections, to highlight the series, or simply to meet layout requirements, *Pilote* occasionally devoted two-page spreads to "Astérix" near page four, thus bumping Michel Tanguy and company temporarily out of position. Cover art selection also reveals Astérix's gradual progression in popularity, with Astérix and Obélix appearing more frequently on covers as of issue no. 21 (they would eventually grace 41 covers<sup>255</sup>) and Obélix taking up his perch in the top-right corner as early as issue as no. 44. In terms of feature articles and sidebars, "Astérix" mentions surfaced by issue no. 13 in an article on the archaeological digs near Clermont-Ferrand in search of the legendary battlefield of Alésia, as well as in a *Pilote* special on the creation of "Astérix" featuring a photograph of the two authors dressed up as Gauls.<sup>256</sup> It is in reader mail in particular, however, that we detect Astérix's rising popularity.

Very early on, "Astérix" figured as just one of many series that caught readers' attention. Michel Tanguy, Barbe-Rouge, P'tit Pat, Zappy Max, and other characters appeared frequently by name in the letters to the editor that mentioned *bandes dessinées* at all. While some letters simply referred to the magazine's BD more generally as "stories," (Yves de Jenhanion of Charente-Maritime, for example, praised *Pilote's* "articles très intéressants et [...] histoires amusantes"<sup>257</sup>), other readers were far more detailed in their preferences, such as Jean-Claude Girard (Isère), who recounted: "La première chose que je regarde dans *Pilote*, c'est l'aventure de Jacques Le Gall contre le bandit de l'Ombre : ensuite, Michel Tanguy, Astérix, le Démon des Caraïbes, P'tit Pat, Cochise, Ivanhoé, Nicolas, les instructifs pilotoramas et enfin, les actualités [...]"<sup>258</sup> Thierry Renault (Seine) also enumerated his favorite stories, perhaps in order of preference as well: "Je suis '*Pilote*' depuis le numéro deux. Il est très passionnant, surtout 'Le Démon des Caraïbes',

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<sup>255</sup> Guillot et. al. 201.

<sup>256</sup> *Pilote* 64/2.

<sup>257</sup> *Pilote* 98/2. Translation: "very interesting articles and [...] amusing stories."

<sup>258</sup> *Pilote* 53/2. Translation: "The first thing that I look at in *Pilote* is the 'aventure de Jacques Le Gall contre le bandit de l'Ombre:' then, Michel Tanguy, Astérix, the 'Démon des Caraïbes,' P'tit Pat, Cochise, Ivanhoé, Nicolas, the instructive pilotoramas and finally the news articles [...]"

Michel Tanguy, Jacques Le Gall contre 'L'Ombre' et P'tit Pat ; Nicolas est amusant."<sup>259</sup>

Seemingly unrepresentative of the majority of *Pilote's* very early readers, Jean-Pierre Desvignes (Paris) demonstrated an early appreciation of *Pilote* specifically for its *bandes dessinées*: "Je m'intéresse beaucoup à votre journal qui est vraiment très bien. [...] Je suggère un concours où il serait question de faire un poème sur les personnages de 'Pilote' ; voici le mien :

C'est 'Pilote' le journal des champions.  
Où nous devons imiter Champollion.  
Nous vivons les aventures d'Astérix.  
Et nous aimons le druide Panoramix.  
Nous admirons l'audace de Soupolet.  
Et nous rions avec son perroquet.  
Nous tremblons avec l'intépide Tanguy.  
Nous avons peur de le voir au 'tapis'.  
Nous aimons bien les Pilotoramas.  
Ainsi que les récits de Nicolas.  
'Pilote', et ses histoires, en général,  
Ont fait de lui notre meilleur journal."<sup>260</sup>

Quite a few readers singled out both Tanguy and Astérix as among their favorite characters. Jacques Mange (Seine) related: "[J]e vous écris car je suis un fidèle lecteur de 'Pilote', que je trouve très intéressant et passionnant. Je voudrais féliciter entre tous Uderzo et J.-M. Charlier, qui ont créé les aventures de Michel Tanguy, aventures que j'attends avec impatience tous les mercredis, ainsi que celles d'Astérix."<sup>261</sup> The Belgian Serge André also favored the two series: "'Pilote' me procure chaque mercredi une distraction aussi éducative que délassante. Ma chambre est tapissée de 'Pilotoramas' et de reproductions en couleurs de nos amis Michel Tanguy

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<sup>259</sup> *Pilote* 9/2. Translation: "I've been a 'Pilote' since the second issue. It is very fascinating, above all the 'Démon des Caraïbes,' Michel Tanguy, Jacques Le Gall against 'L'Ombre' and P'tit Pat; Nicolas is funny."

<sup>260</sup> *Pilote* 34/2. Translation: "I'm very interested in your magazine, which is really very good. [...] I suggest a contest to create a poem about the characters in 'Pilote;' here's mine: 'Pilote' is the magazine of champions / Where we must imitate Champollion / We live the adventures of Astérix / And we love the druid Panoramix / We admire the daring of Soupolet / And we laugh at his parrot / We quake with the intrepid Tanguy / We're afraid to see him knocked down / We love the Pilotoramas / As well as the stories about Nicolas / 'Pilote' and its tales in general / Have made it our favorite magazine."

<sup>261</sup> *Pilote* 51/2. Translation: "I'm writing to you because I am a faithful reader of 'Pilote,' which I find very interesting and fascinating. I would like to congratulate above all Uderzo and J.-M. Charlier, who created the adventures of Michel Tanguy, adventures that I wait impatiently for every Wednesday, as well as those of 'Astérix.'"

[et] Astérix et Obélix, dont je trouve l'histoire si cocasse."<sup>262</sup> Daniel Bouzou (Seine-et-Oise) praised Uderzo in particular: "J'admire beaucoup Uderzo, car c'est vraiment un grand dessinateur, et justement, dans 'Pilote', il montre qu'il a différents styles, soit du genre dessin humoristique avec Astérix et Jehan Soupolet, soit du genre dessin réaliste, comme pour Michel Tanguy."<sup>263</sup> Astute reader Fabrice Huet (Paris) delivered this approbation of the illustrator: "[J]e trouve que l'ex-cocher des aventures de Jehan Soupolet possède beaucoup de ressemblance avec Goscinny. Est-ce vrai ? En ce cas, je rends hommage au talent de Uderzo qui nous montre là qu'il possède également un habile coup de main pour les caricatures."<sup>264</sup>

By 1961, *bandes dessinées* appeared more frequently as the main subject of reader letters. Several wrote to demand that *Pilote* revive certain series and phase out others. Gilles Pasquier (Seine-Maritime) pleaded: "Voudrais-tu me dire quand nous reverrons Jehan Soupolet et ses braves [...] ? Or, cela fait longtemps qu'ils sont absents ! je vous en prie, faites-les revenir, car ils nous manquent terriblement, à moi, à mon frère, et à mes parents."<sup>265</sup> Jean-Claude Collignon (Seine-et-Marne) inquired: "Puis-je vous demander si un jour nous reverrons sur le journal notre amie Rosine, Pistolin, Jacquot le Mousse et Ça va bouillir ?"<sup>266</sup> A group from Rouen similarly wrote: "Constatant que les aventures de P'tit Pat vont bientôt se terminer, nous serions heureux de voir réapparaître dans les pages humoristiques de 'Pilote' nos deux héros préférés : Astérix et Obélix dans de nouvelles aventures."<sup>267</sup> Alex Tkatchoff (Paris), on the other hand, was far less diplomatic: "Je lis 'Pilote' depuis le no. 1. C'est un journal très intéressant qui me procure une

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<sup>262</sup> *Pilote* 91/2. Translation: "'Pilote' brings me entertainment each Wednesday that is as educational as it is relaxing. My bedroom is wallpapered in 'Pilotoramas' and in color reproductions of our friends Michel Tanguy [and] Astérix and Obélix, whose story I find so funny."

<sup>263</sup> *Pilote* 24/3. Translation: "I very much admire Uderzo because he really is a master illustrator, and even in 'Pilote,' he shows that he has different styles, either of a humorous nature with Astérix and Jehan Soupolet, or of a realiste nature, as with Michel Tanguy."

<sup>264</sup> *Pilote* 27/2. Translation: "I find that the former coachman in the adventures of Jehan Soupolet looks a lot like Goscinny. Is it true? In this case, I pay homage to the talent of Uderzo, who shows us that he also possesses an adroitness for caricature."

<sup>265</sup> *Pilote* 64/2. Translation: "Could you tell me when we will see Jehan Soupolet and entourage again [...] ? They've been gone for quite a while! I beg of you, make them reappear, because I, my brother, and my parents all miss them terribly."

<sup>266</sup> *Pilote* 69/2. Translation: "Might I inquire if, one day, we will again see in your magazine our friend Rosine, Pistoline, Jacquot le Mousse and Ça va bouillir?"

<sup>267</sup> *Pilote* 83/2. Translation: "In light of the fact that P'tit Pat will soon be ending, we would be happy to see on the humorous pages of 'Pilote' the return our two favorite heroes: Astérix and Obélix in new adventures."

détente. Mais j'espère que les bandes dessinées de Cochise s'arrêteront un jour. Par contre, je voudrais revoir Astérix..."<sup>268</sup>

Readers began as well to send in their own drawings of the BD characters featured in *Pilote*. Recognizing an area of interest, *Pilote* organized a competition, promising to publish winning drawings within a separate *rubrique* entitled "Nos dessinateurs font l'école."<sup>269</sup> Astérix served as the first subject. Within several weeks, *Pilote* staff had received 1,500 drawings. When the contest subject switched to Jacques Le Gall, Astérix drawings still flooded the *Pilote* studios. In issue no. 69, an editor's note asked: "Ne nous envoyez plus d'ASTERIX."<sup>270</sup> In issue no. 71, a more emphatic message from the editor read: "Et voilà les derniers gagnants de notre sujet : ASTERIX ! Astérix, le glorieux et l'invincible qui a remporté auprès de nos lecteurs de tous âges un succès sans pareil. C'est plus de deux mille envois que nous avons dû juger, au total, pour la plus grande joie... et le plus grand embarras de nos amis Goscinny et Uderzo ! [...]  
ATTENTION : NE NOUS ENVOYEZ PLUS D'ASTERIX !"<sup>271</sup>

By 1963, the popularity of "Astérix" among its core readership seemed confirmed. When "Le Tour de Gaule d'Astérix" appeared in *Pilote* beginning in January of that year, readers discovered a new character: the small dog who would eventually become Obélix's charge and a star of the series in its own right. By the end of the episode, the dog still had no name, and reader mail began to arrive clamoring for the dog's return in subsequent episodes.<sup>272</sup> In issue no. 209, Goscinny and Uderzo launched a reader contest to name the dog. By the end of the year, the authors had sifted through hundreds of possibilities, among them Patracourcix, Papeurderix, Trépetix, Paindépix, Toutousanprix, and Minimix, and had selected Idéfix "parce que c'est un nom court, qui 'sonne' bien, qui claque à l'oreille. Il représente bien le caractère du petit chien ; c'est en effet un jeune animal à idées fixes : il veut toujours suivre ses deux amis gaulois, et il

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<sup>268</sup> *Pilote* 84/2. Translation: "I've read 'Pilote' since issue no. 1. It's a very interesting magazine that provides relaxing entertainment. But I hope that the Cochise comics will end one day. On the other hand, I would like to see Astérix again...."

<sup>269</sup> Translation: "Our Illustrators Gain a Following."

<sup>270</sup> *Pilote* 69/31. Translation: "Do not send us anymore Astérix [drawings]."

<sup>271</sup> *Pilote* 71/31. Translation: "And here are the final winners of our subject, ASTERIX! Astérix, the magnificent and the invincible who has enjoyed unequalled success among our readers of all ages. We have had to judge more than 2,000 submissions in total, to our very great joy... and to the very great pleasure of our friends Goscinny and Uderzo! [...]  
ATTENTION: DO NOT SEND US ANY MORE ASTERIX!"

<sup>272</sup> The dog, interestingly enough, was a joint creation of Goscinny and Uderzo. Goscinny's script indicated that a small dog be pictured in one scene waiting outside a tavern. As a gag, Uderzo drew the dog into subsequent frames, including the famous last scene, in which Obélix finally recognizes the dog's presence in the village and leans over to pet him. Idéfix was not meant by either creator to appear in future episodes.

pense toujours à manger de gros os."<sup>273</sup> The winning name, interestingly enough, had been submitted by four different people, only two of whom were working in concert.

## Conclusion

A poll published in 1968 in the journal *Sondages* delivers a clear picture of Astérix's popularity in France among members of the general public as of winter 1966. Nearly one in two of the French people polled, or 47%, had heard about Astérix. When asked to define what or who Astérix was, 23% responded that he was "un héros de bandes dessinées, d'une revue, [ou qu'il] paraît en bandes dessinées dans *France-Soir*;" 19% defined him as "un petit Gaulois [...] l'ami d'Obélix;" 10% believed he was "un personnage de feuilleton de la radio ou de la T.V.;" and a remaining 11% responded otherwise, and not all incorrectly.<sup>274</sup> A similar poll conducted by Dargaud in October of that year had revealed that 42% of respondents had already heard about Astérix.<sup>275</sup> For a comics hero, the depth of penetration into mainstream consciousness within six years was nothing short of remarkable. Yet *Pilote*, Radio-Luxembourg, Dargaud, and product manufacturers all acted deliberately and aggressively to promote "Astérix," whether as a serial comic strip, in album format, on radio programs, or on the labels of countless consumer products. In other words, the nature of the series itself – Goscinny's scripts, Uderzo's illustrations, the manner of lettering, the humor, the puns, the anachronisms, the parodies, the morals proffered – cannot *alone* serve as a suitable explanation for why, or how, "Astérix" sold millions of albums and became a darling of the media by 1966, nor can it adequately explain how "Astérix" was read and received by its multiple audiences. Institutionalization of "Astérix" by the press, to which we will now turn, marked the last step in the series' meteoric climb to the top of the charts.

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<sup>273</sup> Gaumer 91. Translation: "because it's a short name with a nice ring to it. It represents the little dog's character well; the dog, in fact, is a young animal with fixed ideas: he always wants to follow his two Gaulish friends, and he is always thinking about eating a big bone."

<sup>274</sup> "Variétés," *Sondages* 1 (1968): 80+. Percentage totals are higher than 47% based on multiple answers per respondent. Translation: "a comics hero, from a magazine, or that he appears in the comics section of *France-Soir*;" "a small Gaul [...] Obélix's friend;" "a character in a radio or TV series."

<sup>275</sup> Duchêne 129. Dargaud, not surprisingly, was disappointed in these numbers.

#### IV THE INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF "ASTÉRIX" BY THE PRESS: 1963 - 1970

##### Introduction

In a 1967 interview published in the Catholic weekly *Le Pèlerin du XXIème siècle*, Goscinny concluded his lengthy statement of account of "l'escalade des Gaulois" with the following apt metaphor: "Une fois nos deux compères devenus célèbres, ils ont été 'statufiés'."<sup>276</sup> Goscinny was referring primarily to the availability of Astérix and Obélix action figures in latex, yet his statement underlines two essential, and final, ingredients in the comics series' rise in popularity during the 1960s: celebrity and institutionalization. As "Astérix" acquired national visibility in the wake of branding initiatives by *Pilote*, Radio-Luxembourg, Dargaud, and their commercial partners, both the series' heroes and its authors became household names to nearly half of the French populace. Up to that point, *bande dessinée* had traditionally vaunted its illustrators over its writers, which perpetuated the unfortunate practice of attributing entire works to the illustrators alone. Goscinny, in particular, suffered pecuniarily and psychologically from the imposed anonymity, which had forced him to carve out a niche career by working on numerous strips across journals during his "vache enragée" years.<sup>277</sup> With the rise in popularity of "Astérix," however, Goscinny became one of the first *scénaristes* to emerge from the shadows and make public the central role played by writers in the production of *bandes dessinées*.<sup>278</sup> In consequence, and due in large part to Goscinny's expert manipulation of media exposure, the *scénariste* took up his rightful place next to Uderzo in the spotlight.

The media frenzy that developed around Uderzo, a somewhat reluctant participant, and Goscinny, a master of the art of self-promotion, firmly broke with all BD tradition.<sup>279</sup> They became the first of a new breed of popular cultural celebrity in a field that had known little public glory in France until then.<sup>280</sup> Photographs and biographical sketches of the two creators published in the news media, along with appearances, interviews, favorable reviews, and even reports on their personal wealth accumulation, forged and bolstered their new celebrity status. In 1966, Goscinny and Uderzo were invited on the television show *Panorama*, where they

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<sup>276</sup> Jacques Potin, "Le phénomène Astérix," *Le Pèlerin du XXe siècle* [Paris] 16 Apr. 1967. Translation: "As soon as our two companions became famous, they were turned into statues."

<sup>277</sup> By the end of his career, he had created over 2,000 BD characters.

<sup>278</sup> Groensteen *Astérix* 160.

<sup>279</sup> Numa Sadoul and Albert Uderzo, *Astérix & cie.-- : entretiens avec Uderzo* (Paris: Hachette, 2001) 111.

<sup>280</sup> Hergé may be an exception.

humorously deflected the interviewer's declaration of Astérix as "l'homme de l'année."<sup>281</sup> Around the same time, Astérix and Obélix finally made the transition from the page to the big screen. At the end of 1967, the long-awaited animated version of "Astérix le Gaulois" hit theaters throughout France and Belgium just in time for Christmas. Accompanied by an extensive promotional campaign, which included distributing "potion magique" – hot beverages – to young movie-goers waiting in line outside theaters, the film proved a success.<sup>282</sup> The animated adaptation of *Astérix et Cléopâtre* that came out a year later became another box-office hit.<sup>283</sup> The next year, Goscinny and Uderzo appeared with none other than Hergé himself on the television show *L'invité du dimanche*, where all three cordially complimented each other on their work.<sup>284</sup> Such appearances and mentions in print, on television, and on the air, combined with Goscinny and Uderzo's crossover into film, fortified their cachet as celebrity intellectuals (of a sort) whose star series was "digne de nôtre intérêt," or worthy of recognition by "serious" adults.

The sociologist Michael Schudson has called such media consecration within the social and cultural realms "institutional retention."<sup>285</sup> In his estimation, the enduring popularity of cultural figures, such as Goscinny and Uderzo, and of cultural objects, such as "Astérix," is dependant in part on how well social institutions, acting as gatekeepers, "preserve and pass on [...] the culture they certify." If, he argues, targets of popular interest are "widely available, rhetorically effective, and culturally resonant [...] but] never turn up in a school classroom, never become a part of common reference, never enter into the knowledge formally required for citizenship or job-holding or social acceptability," their longevity and "power" both decrease.<sup>286</sup> "Astérix," as we have seen, was widely accessible at kiosks and bookstores throughout France for a nominal fee. Sales figures of "Astérix" albums as well as reader mail published in *Pilote*

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<sup>281</sup> Duchêne 115. Translation: "man of the year."

<sup>282</sup> The film, however, had sorely disappointed both Goscinny and Uderzo. Dargaud had commissioned the Belgian animation studio Belvision to adapt the first episode for the small screen (Parafrance later picked up the film for theatrical release), without the creators' knowledge. Goscinny and Uderzo discovered the film's existence only after production was complete, a shock not lessened by the film's inferior quality. The next year, they learned that production for a sequel, an adaptation of *La serpe d'or*, was already underway. Both Goscinny and Uderzo negotiated with Dargaud to halt production of the sequel immediately and to destroy all negatives so that the creators could take active roles in both script development and the animation process from project conception. Subsequent films consequently improved in *mise en scène* and quality. For the most part, Goscinny and Uderzo were exceedingly proud of their heroes' Disney-esque transition to the big screen. See Gaumer 28, 136, 149.

<sup>283</sup> Gaumer 149.

<sup>284</sup> Duchêne 158.

<sup>285</sup> Michael Schudson, "How Culture Works: Perspectives From Media Studies on the Efficacy of Symbols." *Theory and Society* 18 (1989): 170.

<sup>286</sup> Schudson 170-171.

have demonstrated that the series resonated with a vast, diverse audience comprised of children and adults alike. By 1970, "Astérix" had also found its way into *collèges* around the country as a pedagogical tool, although reader mail again has shown us that *Pilote*, and so "Astérix," had already entered the classroom by the early 1960s.<sup>287</sup> By the mid-1960s, memorable phrases from the series had slipped into everyday speech. As Goscinny recounted in 1967, Obélix's trademark *réplique*, "Ils sont fous ces Romains,"<sup>288</sup> had become "une sorte de mot de passe."<sup>289</sup> Most importantly, however, as this section will argue, print media coverage during the decade of the 1960s succeeded in taking "Astérix" mainstream. Institutionalization of "Astérix" (the series) and Astérix (the character) by newspapers, magazines, and journals catering to adult readers marked the final transition from anonymity to celebrity for the creators, from niche market to mass market for the series, and from "art mineur" to legitimate cultural form for French BD in general.

This chapter will analyze the key articles from national newspapers, regional newspapers, specialty magazines, and academic journals dating from 1963 through the early 1970s that helped launch "Astérix" and its creators into stardom. As we will see, mainstream print coverage not only introduced the series and its authors to the general public but also organized and framed the "facts" surrounding the series' creation, nature, and reception. Idiomatic patterns of speech, or specific ways of discussing the series' financial success and the response of the public, emerged early on and established a hyperbolic (whence the term "hype") vocabulary that future coverage would adopt. With the emotional register thus established, journalists then embarked on an equally transparent project of legitimization – of their own enjoyment of "Astérix," of the broader significance of "Astérix," of the cultural validity of *bande dessinée*, and of BD *dessinateur* and BD *scénariste* as respectable professions. The reliance on "expert" voices, including those of the creators, along with rampant name-dropping and an insistence on the series' historical or educational relevance, all served as powerful attempts at justification and legitimization. The inclusion of creator interviews also provided a forum in which Goscinny and Uderzo could carefully craft their public personae. Goscinny, we will see, became particularly adept at controlling his public image, which in turn intensified the aura already surrounding both the creators and their creation. Finally, many articles served a more fundamental and influential function: that of teaching the public how to read "Astérix." A review of journalists'

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<sup>287</sup> Ory Goscinny 151.

<sup>288</sup> Translation: "These Romans are crazy."

<sup>289</sup> Guillot et. al. 208. Translation: "a sort of pass code."

interpretations of "Astérix" and of the statements of intent by Goscinny in particular will reveal how "Astérix" was received by "professional" readers, or those paid to review the series. The articles by journalists acting as opinion-makers on a national stage will in turn provide insight into how ordinary readers at home encountering "Astérix" for the first time in the mid-1960s may have understood it.

### **Establishing the Emotional Register**

Articles introducing Goscinny, Uderzo, and "Astérix" began appearing in print media as early as 1963. In 1966, adult newspapers, magazines, and journals discovered the series and declared it a "phénomène." Portraits of the creators and overwhelmingly positive reviews of previous albums and upcoming releases appeared in *L'Express*, *Le Figaro littéraire*, *La Semaine*, *La Vie catholique*, *Arts et loisirs*, *Aurore*, and even the women's magazine *Echo de la mode*. Within five years, *Le Monde*, *Le Nouvel observateur*, *Paris-Match*, *Le Quotidien*, *La Dépêche du Midi*, *Paris jour*, *La Nouvelle critique*, *Le Nouveau candide*, and *Le Cid* had all run initial articles on "Astérix" and its creators.<sup>290</sup> Astérix and/or Obélix were featured on the covers of *L'Express* in 1966, of the Belgian journal *Le Soir illustré* in November 1968, and of *Le Nouveau candide* a year later. In addition, photographs of one or both of the creators graced the covers of *Le Pèlerin* in June 1969, *Le Cid* in April 1970, *Télé-gadget* two years later, and *Parents* in September 1975. Cover layouts in particular, which generally devoted the full page to illustrations of Astérix and Obélix or to photographs of the creators, seemed only to confirm the *vedette* status of authors and characters alike.<sup>291</sup>

In the minds of Goscinny, Uderzo, and many who have studied "Astérix," two articles in particular seemed to mark the turning point in Astérix's rise in popularity: the *L'Express* article from September 19, 1966, which proclaimed on its cover, "Le phénomène Astérix : la nouvelle coqueluche des Français;"<sup>292</sup> and the leading article in the December 15, 1967, issue of *Le*

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<sup>290</sup> Goscinny quoted in Potin.

<sup>291</sup> Newspapers were responsible in other ways as well for bringing "Astérix" to the masses. In 1967, Dargaud launched a newspaper stuffer called *L'Illustré du Dimanche* featuring previously run episodes of "Astérix" and other long-running strips, such as "Le Démon des Caraïbes" and "Les Aventures de Michel Tanguy." Although short-lived, the supplement did introduce the readership of the regional newspapers *Sud-Ouest*, *République le Provençal*, *Le Républicain Lorrain*, *Le Journal du Dimanche*, *Paris-Normandie*, *Le Télégramme de Brest et de l'Ouest*, *Midi Libre*, and *La Nouvelle République du Centre-Ouest* to Goscinny and Uderzo's work (see Gaumer 142). In addition, a career milestone for both Goscinny and Uderzo came in 1974 with the publication of their twenty-first episode, "Le Cadeau de César," in *Le Monde* beginning in July 1974.

<sup>292</sup> Translation: "The Astérix phenomenon: the new darling of the French."

*Nouveau candide*, entitled "La folie Astérix."<sup>293</sup> Jean-Noël Gurgand's article in *L'Express* was not, in fact, the first of its kind, nor was Serge Lentz's follow-up a year later the next to appear on the creators and the series. Yet both articles clearly illustrate the hyperbolic language – and heightened emotional register – within which the national press situated its commentary. Like the words "phénomène" and "folie," other phrases emerged in print throughout the 1960s that firmly established "Astérix" first as a best-seller and subsequently as a mania. This section will demonstrate how *la grande presse* contributed to the rise in popularity of Goscinny, Uderzo, and "Astérix" not just by recounting the hype surrounding all things "Astérix," but by creating it in and of itself.

The majority of the articles studied summarized key releases and media events after the launch of "Astérix" and relied on sales figures and poll results to establish the *ampleur* of the growing enthusiasm for the series. Laundry lists of accomplishments, from the naming of the satellite after Astérix and the branding of the Orléans *floralies* in honor of Astérix to the theatrical releases of "Astérix" animated films, the presence of "Astérix" on France-Inter radio, television appearances by the creators, and the proliferation of "Astérix"-themed products on the market, firmly defined the series as increasingly ubiquitous in everyday life and a mounting national sensation. More importantly, however, the usage of cold, hard "facts" in the form of sales data, usually within the opening paragraphs, seemed to leave little room to doubt the existence of a publishing phenomenon that had touched nearly half of the French public. Yet the hyperbolic tone adopted by all of the articles studied added a highly charged emotional element to otherwise dry reporting of albums sales and public opinion survey results. Astérix, the journalists clamored in unison, had become socially significant. *Aurore* in 1966 proclaimed boldly without divulging its sources that one in three French children read "Astérix," along with 85% of their parents. The "folle aventure," the article stated with pride, was even enough to turn the series into a veritable rival of "Tintin."<sup>294</sup> *Le Nouveau candide* stated the next year that "Astérix" had, in fact, already outpaced "Tintin," "l'ex-vedette No 1 de la bande dessinée francophone."<sup>295</sup> *L'Express* effused in 1966 that "600 000 exemplaires de la première édition

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<sup>293</sup> Translation: "The Astérix mania."

<sup>294</sup> Anne Manson, "Grâce à Astérix, le nouveau rival de Tintin" *Aurore* [Paris] 22 Mar. 1966.

<sup>295</sup> Serge Lentz, "La folie Astérix," *Le Nouveau Candide* [Paris] 348 (1967). Translation: "the former number-one star of French comics."

d'Astérix chez les Bretons' étaient pratiquement épuisés. Cela ne s'était jamais vu."<sup>296</sup> *La Vie catholique* that same year gauged the number of albums sold in 1966 at a record 1m copies.<sup>297</sup> *La Semaine*'s 1966 article included the superlative statements that Astérix had become "le héros dessiné le plus célèbre de l'année" and "le plus populaire des héros français de bandes dessinées" in just six years and eight episodes, thanks to the success of the latest album, *Astérix chez les Bretons*.<sup>298</sup> *Paris-Match* in 1967 related that *Astérix légionnaire* had sold 1.2m copies in just eight days; all told, the article reported, 9m copies of ten "Astérix" albums had sold in seven years, making Astérix "le rival des plus fameux personnages de Walt Disney" in addition to a "vedette de cinéma."<sup>299</sup> *Le Nouveau candide*'s article from the same month imbued its description of the Astérix phenomenon with a pestilential dimension: "En 6 ans [... Astérix] a contaminé les deux tiers de la France."<sup>300</sup> *Le Pèlerin* revealed in 1967 that one in four French people read "Astérix."<sup>301</sup> In 1969, *La Nouvelle critique* published that two in three French read "Astérix."<sup>302</sup> The "phénomène" had even acquired a global reach by 1971: *Le Nouvel observateur*'s obligatory tally of sales data mentioned that new albums were being released at a rate of 1.3m copies each print run and that "Astérix" had already been translated into a dozen languages, including Japanese.<sup>303</sup> The "folie" in France seemed to have exploded its borders.

It is interesting at this point to consider the potentially reciprocal effects of increasing media coverage on future album sales. As Dargaud augmented initial print runs with each successive album release, the national press, as we have just seen, related with gusto that albums were flying off the shelves at record numbers and at record speeds. Could extensive media coverage, when couched in language promoting "Astérix" as "un mythe," "un héros national," "une mode," "un phénomène social," "une gallomanie," and "une folie," have attracted a new market or expanded an existing one by sheer force of persuasion? In returning to Schudson's

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<sup>296</sup> Jean-Noël Gurgand, "Le phénomène Astérix, la nouvelle coqueluche des Français" *L'Express* [Paris] 16 Sep. 1966. Translation: "600,000 copies of the first edition of 'Astérix in Britain' were practically wiped out. This had never been seen before."

<sup>297</sup> Louis Caro, "Deux humoristes font vivre les français à l'heure gauloise avec... Astérix notre grand-père" *La vie catholique* 1106 (1966).

<sup>298</sup> P.M., "Goscinny," *La Semaine* 11 Nov. 1966. Translation: "the most famous drawn hero of the year;" "the most popular French hero in comics."

<sup>299</sup> Virginie Merlin and Manuel Litran, "Astérix devient star" *Paris-Match* 23 Dec. 1967, supplement. Translation: "the rival of Walt Disney's most famous characters;" "movie star."

<sup>300</sup> Lentz. Emphasis added. Translation: "In 6 years, [... Astérix] has contaminated two-thirds of France."

<sup>301</sup> Potin.

<sup>302</sup> Hervé Barraud and S. de Sède, "La mythologie d'Astérix" *La Nouvelle critique* 26 (1969).

<sup>303</sup> Jean Kaminsky, "Une certaine idée de la Gaule" *Le Nouvel Observateur* 6 Dec. 1971.

argument that "social acceptability" plays an important role in institutionalization, we might argue tentatively that readers unfamiliar with "Astérix" by the mid-1960s may have felt pressured to participate in the popular cultural phenomenon proclaimed in so many respected journals to be gripping the nation (and worthy of the attention). In general, journalists crafted friendly, enthusiastic invitations to become acquainted with the series, such as the following opener that appeared in *La Vie catholique* in 1966: "Astérix ! Encore Astérix ! Toujours Astérix ! On ne parle plus que d'Astérix ! Ouvrez-vous votre poste de radio ? C'est le quart d'heure d'Astérix ! [...] Vous arrêtez-vous à une station d'essence pour faire le plein ? Vous voyez approcher un pompiste aux moustaches tombantes 'Astérix' qui vous colle sur le pare-brise un papillon Astérix [...]." <sup>304</sup> Overt admonishment of readers' ignorance did, however, surface, such as in the opening paragraphs of the 1966 article in *La Semaine Provence*:

Quoi, vous ne connaissez pas Astérix, ce Vercingétorix au gros nez et au petit pied qui s'en va-t-en guerre toutes les semaines dans *Pilote* et *Le Pèlerin* ? Et Obélix, le porteur de menhirs, et Panoramix le druide, et leur chef Abraracourcix et Assurancetourix, et tous les autres ? Vous ne connaissez pas ces personnages savoureux qui, depuis quelques années, ont crevé le mur des bandes dessinées ? [...] Désolé, mais votre culture est décidément incomplète. Vous allez vous couvrir de ridicule devant les enfants et dans les salons de Paris [...]. <sup>305</sup>

We may well conclude that the relationship between media coverage and increasing public interest in the series was an interdependent one. Each successive article on "Astérix" appeared to build on the formulae established in previous coverage. By recycling key terminology and organizing and presenting brand accomplishments in surprisingly similar ways, print media succeeded in delivering a tightly packaged message that may have gained in persuasive power the more often it was repeated. Given the sheer scale of the media exposure – 1966, for instance, saw the publication of nearly a feature article a month on "Astérix" in national journals –

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<sup>304</sup> Caro. Translation: "Astérix! More Astérix! Always Astérix! People are only talking about Astérix! Turn on your radio? It's the 15 minutes of Astérix! [...] Stop at a gas station to fill up? You'll see an attendant approach with a drooping 'Astérix' moustache affix a ticket to your windshield [...]."

<sup>305</sup> J.-P. Hauttecoeur, "Goscinny et Uderzo les créateurs d'Astérix et Obélix" *La Semaine Provence* 9 Sep. 1966. Translation: "What, you don't know Astérix, that Vercingétorix with a big nose and small feet who goes off to war each week in the pages of *Pilote* and *Le Pèlerin*? And Obélix, the menhir deliverer, and Panoramix the druid, and their chief Abraracourcix and Assurancetourix, and all the others? You don't know these savory characters who, for several years now, have been breaking down resistance to *bande dessinée*? [...] Sorry, but your education is decidedly incomplete. You're going to cover yourself in ridicule in front of children and in the drawing rooms of Paris [...]."

consistent pandering to the craze in hyperbolic language by journalists who had defined the "phenomenon" in the first place most likely played an important role in Astérix's rise in popularity.

### **Legitimizing the Field (and "Astérix") to Justify Enjoyment**

In articles published even at the close of the 1960s, we see deliberate efforts by journalists to justify their own interest in what was still, after all, a *bande dessinée* series created for children and, what may have been worse, a highly exploited and lucrative marketing asset. Such efforts at redemption seemed all the more necessary for journals like *L'Express*, *Le Monde*, *Le Figaro littéraire*, and *Le Nouvel observateur*, those "mastodontes de la presse française" specializing in news, politics, and Culture with a capital C.<sup>306</sup> Given the tabloid nature of the language tacitly required for speaking about "le phénomène Astérix," intellectual journals tended to clarify their positions vis-à-vis the series and the format in general more ardently than entertainment news magazines like *Paris-Match*. Yet, as this section will demonstrate, all of the articles studied fulfilled the pivotal legitimizing function of validating "Astérix" as a literary series "digne de notre intérêt" and of declaring *bande dessinée* a story-telling format worthy of being rescued – finally – from the gutter. In fact, through their own reporting, the journalists did more than simply proclaim "Astérix" and the BD format fit for adult consumption. They related anecdotes of "serious" adults – politicians, sociologists, psychologists, even themselves – who not only professed to reading "Astérix" in private, but openly admitted to enjoying the series. They also actively participated in constructing ways of thinking about BD *dessinateur* and *scénariste* as legitimate professions by educating the public on the technical skills and intellectual ability required to produce a best-selling comics series or a film adaptation. In addition, journalists highlighted the historical accuracy of both illustrations and text by discussing the creators' reliance on (legitimate) documentation to produce each episode. Such declarations of pedagogical import in turn helped validate "Astérix" and the format as suitable for adults.

In many cases, journalists took pains to establish that *bande dessinée* – or at least "Astérix" – was no longer, or had never been, just for children. Only after raising the profile of the format from children's literature to popular literature could they then incorporate testimonials

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<sup>306</sup> Goscinny quoted in Potin.

from "high-brow" readers to help define BD and "Astérix" as legitimate French cultural forms, and so worthy of their own attention. An apologist undercurrent existed nonetheless. Francis Martineau, writing for *Rallye* in 1963, began on the defensive: "Les illustrés ? [...] Des bandes dessinées à longuer de page, dont la pauvreté, la platitude sont la plupart du temps effarantes. Mais parfois on tombe en arrêt devant le chef-d'oeuvre, le mot n'est pas trop fort [...]." <sup>307</sup> *La Semaine* continued in the same vein: "La bande dessinée est la plupart du temps le refuge de la platitude, de l'infantilisme et de la vulgarité, mais dans le cas d'Astérix on a d'autant plus de plaisir à en souligner le succès que cette fois celui-ci ne s'est pas trompé d'adresse : il récompense le talent et la conscience professionnelle." <sup>308</sup> Gurgand attempted to counter the shame of reading comics in his article in *L'Express* by describing "[d]es parents qui ne se cachent pas pour lire 'Astérix'. Non seulement cela n'est pas 'honteux', mais les grandes personnes sont sûres de saisir des astuces inaccessibles aux enfants." <sup>309</sup> In 1967, *Le Nouveau candide* was one of the first to situate the turn towards BD within an evolutionary timeline: "la bande dessinée était encore très largement ignorée des adultes il y a seulement trois ans." <sup>310</sup> *Paris-Match* confirmed that "Astérix" had conquered the adult reading public when it related in 1967 that Goscinny and Uderzo were "les premiers étonnés du succès contagieux d'Astérix, non seulement auprès des jeunes, mais aussi auprès des adultes." <sup>311</sup> *La Nouvelle critique* two years later likewise declared "Astérix" a hit among adults, using its success as justification for the rehabilitation of BD in general: "Depuis longtemps déjà les enfants ont cessé d'être les uniques lecteurs d'Astérix. [...] C'est un moyen d'expression et de communication qui comporte une signification implicite digne de retenir sérieusement notre attention." <sup>312</sup> The *Le Monde* article from 1970 situated BD's turning-point towards a new adult readership as early as 1960: "depuis une dizaine d'années, les

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<sup>307</sup> Francis Martineau, "Ils font des millions de jeunes" *Rallye* 1963. Translation: "Illustrated magazines? [...] Full-page comics whose poverty, clichés are for the most part frightening. But sometimes you encounter a masterpiece, the word isn't too strong [...]."

<sup>308</sup> P.M. Translation: "Comics is mostly the refuge of clichés, infantilism, and vulgarity, but in the case of Astérix, we are all the more pleased to point out that the success has been merited: the series showcases talent and rewards professional conscience."

<sup>309</sup> Gurgand. Translation: "parents who hide to read 'Astérix.' Not only is it not 'shameful,' but grown-ups are sure to understand the jokes inaccessible to children."

<sup>310</sup> Lentz. Translation: "*bande dessinée* was still largely unknown to adults just three years ago."

<sup>311</sup> Merlin et. al. Translation: "the first to be surprised by the spreading success of Astérix, not only among youth, but also among adults."

<sup>312</sup> Barraud et. al. Translation: "For a long time already, children have stopped being the sole readers of Astérix. [...] It is a mode of expression and communication consisting of implicit meaning that is worth our serious attention."

grandes personnes tendent à prouver qu'elles sont nombreuses à retrouver une âme d'enfant...."<sup>313</sup> Lartéguy, writing for *Le Figaro littéraire* four years earlier, aptly represented such a reader. An unabashed admirer of "Astérix," he recounted humorously: "Quand la 'vox populi' [...] m'apprend qu'un nouvel album d'Astérix vient de paraître, je cours chez le libraire. Il sourit. Depuis longtemps il voit défiler tant de parents qui s'abritent derrière leur progéniture pour se livrer au vice des albums illustrés. [...] Nous sommes nombreux à aimer Astérix."<sup>314</sup> Finally, and perhaps most surprisingly, *Le Nouvel observateur* in 1971 revised the historical timeline of BD's legitimization process even more drastically, most likely because the post-May 1968 climate had already enabled the assimilation into intellectual culture of other forms of graphic and popular art: "Il y a vingt-cinq ans," the journal declared, "on ne considérait pas encore la bande dessinée comme un art [...]."<sup>315</sup> *Bande dessinée*, by members of the national adult press at least, had finally been canonized.

Name-dropping surfaced repeatedly as an effective status-building technique employed by journalists across the political and cultural spectrums. The article in *Arts et loisirs* compared total sales of the previous "Astérix" album published to the number of copies sold of the most recent Prix Goncourt winner (the latter underperformed the former, which did not, however, according to the article, equal the sales in France of the latest James Bond).<sup>316</sup> *La Semaine* published that Goscinny had received requests from Maisons de la Culture seeking permission to stage "Astérix"-themed dances.<sup>317</sup> *Le Figaro littéraire* cited the current Prime Minister, Georges Pompidou, as an "Astérix" fan.<sup>318</sup> *Le Nouveau candide* likewise hinted at the series' appeal among government officials: "les albums d'Astérix naviguent avec autant d'aisance dans le cartable de l'écolier que dans les tiroirs de M. Pompidou ; on chuchote même que, à l'élysée, le

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<sup>313</sup> Vassilis Alexakis, "Étude de Fenouillard à Astérix, les héros d'enfance" *Le Monde* 25 Dec. 1970. Translation: "for ten or so years, grown-ups have tended to show that they are numerous in regaining the soul of a child...."

<sup>314</sup> Jean Lartéguy, "Au secours d'un chef d'œuvre en péril...Ne touchez pas à Astérix !" *Le Figaro Littéraire* 1966. Translation: "When the 'vox populi' [...] inform me that a new Astérix album has just been released, I run to the bookseller's. He smiles. For a while now, he's seen so many parents passing through, hiding behind their offspring, to indulge in the vice of illustrated albums. [...] Those of us who love Astérix are many."

<sup>315</sup> Kaminsky. Translation: "Twenty-five years ago, one did not yet consider *bande dessinée* an art form [...]."

<sup>316</sup> O. Pottar, "Astérix, le druide, le guide et la potion magique" *Arts et Loisirs* 22 (1966).

<sup>317</sup> P.M.

<sup>318</sup> Lartéguy.

petit Gaulois a un lecteur de choix."<sup>319</sup> *La Vie catholique* printed the following amusing anecdote about the ex-finance minister Giscard d'Estaing:

[II] se retrouvait dans l'avion de New York en compagnie de quelques spécialistes des questions nucléaires et, un peu à l'écart, d'un diplomate soviétique qui semblait absorbé par la lecture de la Pravda. Soudain, dans le feu de la discussion, Giscard d'Estaing laissa choir sa serviette. Des documents s'éparpillèrent. Le Soviétique sursauta. Top secret ? Confidentiel ? – C'est tout simplement Astérix, Excellence... murmura l'ancien ministre. [...] Personne n'avait à demander qui était Astérix, et pourquoi un petit ouvrage portant ce titre figurait dans les bagages du ministre – car tout le monde connaît Astérix.<sup>320</sup>

*L'Express*, along with others, referenced the article on "Astérix" that had appeared in none other than the *New York Times*, perhaps in an effort to bolster the local significance of the *petit Gaulois* by pointing out his global reach.<sup>321</sup> *Paris-Match*, in recounting how the animated film "Astérix le Gaulois" had jumped from the small to the big screen, mentioned that Parafrance had bought distribution rights to the film after viewing it at the Cannes Film Festival.<sup>322</sup>

Linking "Astérix" to legitimate cultural institutions (the Prix Goncourt, the Maisons de la Culture, the *New York Times*, the Cannes Film Festival) as well as to heads of state, the ultimate "serious" readers, represents only one facet of the name-dropping strategy employed within the articles studied. The inclusion of "expert" opinions emanating from academia or the intelligentsia likewise facilitated the "Astérix" series' entry into the annals of legitimate culture. More importantly, however, the practice of allowing respected intellectuals – "en connaisseur"<sup>323</sup> – to explain why both "Astérix" and BD were worthy of public interest removed the burden of shame from the journalists themselves. *Rallye* resorted to the tactic in its opening paragraphs: "Pourquoi aime-t-on les aventures d'Astérix et de son compère ? Je connais un psychologue qui m'a

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<sup>319</sup> Lentz. Translation: "the Astérix albums enter with as much ease into the schoolboy's backpack as into the desk drawers of M. Pompidou; there's even a whisper that, at the *Elysée*, the little Gaul has a reader of choice."

<sup>320</sup> Caro. Translation: "He found himself again on the airplane to New York in the company of several nuclear specialists and a Soviet diplomat a little off to one side who appeared absorbed in reading Pravda. Suddenly, in the heat of discussion, Giscard d'Estaing let his briefcase drop to the floor. Documents came spilling out. The Soviet jumped. Top secret? Confidential? – It's only Astérix, Your Excellence...murmured the former minister. [...] No one had to ask who Astérix was, and why a little book bearing his name was in the minister's baggage – because everyone knows who Astérix is."

<sup>321</sup> Gurgand.

<sup>322</sup> Merlin et. al.

<sup>323</sup> Gurgand. Translation: "as experts."

répondu gravement : 'Parce que tout homme désire être astucieux comme Astérix et fort comme Obélix'.<sup>324</sup> *Arts et loisirs* related the following anecdote: "La semaine dernière, dans un grand magasin de la rive droite, une vingtaine d'écrivains en renom, et parmi eux trois académiciens habitués des gros tirages, dédicaciaient [sic] leurs œuvres. [...] Le record était battu par un champion solitaire : Astérix, avec près de 300 signatures."<sup>325</sup> *La Semaine Provence* chronicled the transition from Astérix, popular BD hero, to Astérix, legitimate subject of academic inquiry: "Astérix était un héros national depuis plusieurs années. Il est devenu en quelques mois un sujet de thèse, de symposiums, d'exposés académiques. Les psychologues, les ethnologues, les sociologues se penchent gravement sur lui, scrutent son comportement, dissèquent ses attitudes. On y veut voir le reflet d'une époque."<sup>326</sup> *L'Express* cited the conclusions on "Astérix" presented in the "ouvrage très sérieux sur les bandes dessinées" published by a M. Gilbert Château.<sup>327</sup> The *Le Monde* article likewise introduced readers to the accomplishments of academics in the area of *bande dessinée* by listing a spate of recent publications, including *Bande dessinée et figuration narrative* and the anthologies *Les Copains de votre enfance*, published by Denoël, and *Les Chefs-d'oeuvre de la bande dessinée*, published by Planète.<sup>328</sup> As we will see in a later section, the practice of relying on experts – including the series' creators – to "interpret" Astérix for the masses allowed journalists to validate their own enjoyment of the series to themselves and to their readers by leaving the work of justification to "connaisseurs."

A third crucial step in the legitimization, and thus institutionalization, process of "Astérix" by print media involved educating the public about the professions in the field of *bande dessinée*. National press presented Goscinny and Uderzo as suit-and-tie professionals nearing middle age who were masters of their respective crafts. Through interviews and biographical portraits, which were often accompanied by photographs of the two at work, journalists introduced their readers to the seriousness of the profession: the years of practice, the

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<sup>324</sup> Martineau. Translation: "Why do we love the adventures of Astérix and his companion? I know a psychologist who responded gravely: 'Because all men want to be crafty like Astérix and strong like Obélix.'"

<sup>325</sup> Pottar. Translation: "Last week, in a department store on the right bank, twenty or so writers of renown, and among them three academics used to high book sales, were signing their works. [...] The record was broken by a solitary champion: Astérix, with nearly 300 signatures."

<sup>326</sup> Hauteceur. Translation: "Astérix has been a national hero for many years. In several months, he became the subject of theses, symposiums, and academic papers. Psychologists, ethnographers, sociologists have seriously looked into him, scrutinized his comportment, dissected his attitudes. They want to find in him the reflection of an era."

<sup>327</sup> Gurgand. Translation: "a very serious work on comics."

<sup>328</sup> Alexakis.

skills and perfectionism required, the long working hours, the day-to-day uncertainty, the dangers of public exposure, the burdens of marketing. The image of the field that emerged in the articles not only distinguished *dessinateur* from *scénariste*, but also placed both firmly within the artisanal, if not the intellectual, realm. Uderzo, it was reported in *Rallye*, worked so meticulously that it took him an entire week to produce just nine *planches*, or boards.<sup>329</sup> *La Semaine Provence* calculated that Uderzo required 900 hours to complete a single album, which accounted for the twice-yearly release schedule implemented by Dargaud. Goscinny, on the other hand, the article reported, needed only a week to produce a completed script, once he had hit upon an idea.<sup>330</sup> The image of the feverish writer/intellectual appeared again in *Le Figaro's* article: Goscinny, when inspired, wrote his scripts "en quelques nuits d'insomnie."<sup>331</sup> *Le Nouveau candide* described the "somme énorme de travail que nécessite la confection d'un album d'Astérix."<sup>332</sup> The illustrator's work became "tout un labeur long et difficile que Uderzo reprend ensuite et traduit en images à la cadence d'une planche toutes les vingt heures."<sup>333</sup> When "Astérix" appeared in theaters, journalists took the opportunity to describe the production process in great detail. *Paris jour* boasted that "150 personnes travaill[ai]ent pendant plus d'un an à la réalisation du dessin animé."<sup>334</sup> *Paris-Match* proclaimed the animated film a victory not only for France, but for all of Europe. The technicians at Belvision, "les seuls équipés en Europe pour un tel travail," had accomplished movement at the rate of 450 images per minute, which required a total of 45,000 boards, all of which were produced for a mere 16m FF.<sup>335</sup> "C'est le premier dessin animé français de long métrage depuis quinze ans," the magazine happily reported.<sup>336</sup> By then comparing Belvision's production costs to Disney's, the magazine seemed to imply that the latter may now have to contend with a legitimate rival.<sup>337</sup>

Lastly, several articles highlighted the historical accuracy of Goscinny's scripts and Uderzo's drawings, as if faithfulness to history textbooks, despite the creators' insistence that

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<sup>329</sup> Martineau.

<sup>330</sup> Hauteceur.

<sup>331</sup> Philippe Bouvard, "Le Planning d'Astérix évitera la saturation" *Le Figaro* 29 Oct. 1969. Translation: "in several nights of insomnia."

<sup>332</sup> Translation: "enormous sum of work required to produce an Astérix album."

<sup>333</sup> Lentz. Translation: "a long and difficult job that Uderzo then takes up and translates into illustrations at a rate of one board every twenty hours."

<sup>334</sup> unattributed, "Ça va bouger chez les Gaulois" *Paris Jour* 20 Dec. 1967, supplement. Translation: "150 people worked for more than a year to complete the animated film."

<sup>335</sup> Translation: "the only ones outfitted in Europe to accomplish such a job."

<sup>336</sup> Translation: "It's the first feature-length, French animated film in fifteen years."

<sup>337</sup> Merlin et. al.

their series was meant as pastiche only, could earn the series a place among the greats. *Echo de la mode* ran an entire article in 1966 verifying "l'authenticité des faits rapportés dans cette histoire de Gaule désopilante" by comparing them with accepted historical accounts of Gaulish life.<sup>338</sup> *Aurore* emphasized Goscinny's reliance upon *La Guerre des Gaules* when fleshing out storylines.<sup>339</sup> *Le Nouveau candide* asserted that the "détails de chaque album [étaient] d'une rigoureuse authenticité."<sup>340</sup> *Arts et loisirs*, among others, recounted how an "égyptologue" had asked Goscinny how he knew that Egyptian slaves were, in fact, volunteers at the whip instead of subjugated to it, when the finding had yet to be published in any academic journal before the release of *Astérix et Cléopâtre*. Goscinny did not divulge his sources.<sup>341</sup> In reality, Goscinny and Uderzo did arm themselves with extensive documentation when producing "Astérix" episodes, which explains in part why Uderzo required six months to produce an album. When writing *Astérix et les Normands*, for instance, Goscinny turned to *Histoire de Danemark* to verify dominant traits, gods, culinary tradition, and the like.<sup>342</sup> To prepare for *Astérix en Corse*, Goscinny and Uderzo undertook "un voyage de reconnaissance" to collect data on local customs and to take photographs of the region that Uderzo could work from later on.<sup>343</sup> The insistence in print media, however, that the creators provided more than just amusing stories – that the series instead possessed intrinsic educational merit – further recommended "Astérix" to patrons of "high-brow" culture who, until then, had been otherwise uninterested in the ninth art.

### **Teaching the Public How to Read "Astérix"**

Press on "Astérix" from the 1960s adopted several tactics to explain the series to the public, or to offer ways in which to interpret its deeper significance, should readers so desire. By printing extensive interviews with the creators, during which Goscinny predominantly defended himself against all manner of suggestion and accusation, the articles allowed the authors to indicate unequivocally how "Astérix" was *not* meant to be read. Yet most journalists were quick to dismiss outright or sidestep stated authorial intention. After cursory acknowledgement of Goscinny's motivations, they then imposed either their own interpretations of the series' social

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<sup>338</sup> Marie Vals, "Astérix et sa vérité historix" *L'Echo de la mode* 31 Dec. 1966. Translation: "the authenticity of the facts in this hilarious version of the history of the Gauls."

<sup>339</sup> Manson.

<sup>340</sup> Lentz. Translation: "details of each album were of a rigorous authenticity."

<sup>341</sup> Pottar.

<sup>342</sup> Guillot et. al. 174.

<sup>343</sup> Andrieu xxv.

and political significance, the opinions of carefully selected experts, or both. One of the consequences, or perhaps benefits, of devoting so much space to Goscinny and Uderzo's own words was that it gave the creators a forum in which to craft their public personae. Goscinny, much more than Uderzo, took advantage of the media exposure to explain, seemingly *sans cesse* and in similar language across interviews, that his hero, in fact, did not emanate from the political right, left, or center, and that the series was always only ever meant to make people laugh.

A closer look at press from the 1960s reveals several important, and simultaneous, processes of myth creation underway. The creators' own denials and avowals worked to define the parameters of a myth of "le Français moyen"<sup>344</sup> enthralled by a story of "nos ancêtres les Gaulois" that depicted its heroes as "cow-boys" in an original Western manufactured specifically to appeal to modern French sensibilities. Journalists on the right tended to appropriate Astérix as a Gaullist symbol of strength and authority; Astérix in this scenario represented "l'homme providentiel."<sup>345</sup> *Gauchistes* tended to read "Astérix" as an allegory of the Resistance. By the mid-1960s, the imperial target may have shifted from the Third Reich to America to the Soviet Union (for some) to "le patron"<sup>346</sup> by 1968, but the David and Goliath message remained. This section will illustrate divergences as well as convergences in interpretations of "Astérix" to argue that any extrapolation, no matter how politically motivated and how fiercely countered by the creators themselves, still served the vital function of institutionalizing Astérix as a national emblem whose imbued meaning was well worth fighting over.

For the past 50 years, Uderzo has been explaining his creation to journalists, biographers, academics, radio announcers, television hosts, and others in fairly consistent language that has prevented any overt "récupération politique"<sup>347</sup> (with the creators' blessings, that is) of Astérix or Obélix or of the series' central premise.<sup>348</sup> Before Goscinny died in 1977, he, too, delivered interviews striking in their similarity. In the articles from the 1960s, we get a clear sense of how he managed, and most likely consciously manipulated, his public image to appear to remain mainstream, politically unengaged, earnest in his *métier*, noble in intention, and accessible to

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<sup>344</sup> Translation: "the average Frenchman."

<sup>345</sup> Translation: "the man sent from heaven." This phrase was generally used as a descriptor for de Gaulle.

<sup>346</sup> Translation: "the boss."

<sup>347</sup> Translation: "political appropriation."

<sup>348</sup> A pro-Nazi German translation of an "Astérix" episode actually surfaced in the early 1960s. Goscinny and Uderzo involved the French government to put a halt to its publication, citing copyright violation.

readers across gender and generation. Questions concerning the alleged anti-Semitic, xenophobic, sexist, and overtly political content in "Astérix" solicited a variety of responses all drawing from the same fount of inspiration. Goscinny in *Aurore*:

On a dit que je faisais de la xénophobie alors qu'il n'y a rien que je déteste autant, d'abord parce que j'ai passé toute ma jeunesse entre l'Argentine et les États-Unis et que j'ai été le premier à en souffrir. [...] Il y a trop d'exégèses à propos de mon bonhomme. Nos intentions étaient beaucoup plus simples que toutes celles qu'on nous prête. Nous voulions seulement tenter d'amuser les lecteurs. [...] [Par rapport au manque de femmes dans "Astérix"] Il existe une 'Commission de censure de la presse des jeunes' très, très sévère, croyez-moi. Nous en glissons quelques-unes, prudemment, mais si nous introduisons un certain nombre de belles filles dans nos séries, il faudra bien que les personnages réagissent devant elles. Et alors là, ça pose des tas, mais des tas de problèmes !<sup>349</sup>

Goscinny in *La Semaine Provence*:

Notre seule ambition, c'est de faire rire. [...] Le gros problème, c'est que l'on a honte de rire en France. Alors, on se cherche des excuses. Ce n'est pas nouveau. [...] [Par rapport au manque de femmes dans "Astérix"] Il y a la Commission de censure, comme toujours [...]. Et tenez, si nous n'avons pas mis de femmes plus tôt dans nos bandes, c'est bien la preuve que nous ne sommes pas misogynes. Tous nos personnages étaient grotesques. Il aurait fallu que les filles aussi soient ridicules. Nous les aimons trop pour ça....<sup>350</sup>

Goscinny in *L'Express*:

Ces exégèses ne sont pas raisonnables [...]. Je vous assure que je ne suis ni nationaliste, ni chauvin, ni xénophobe. J'aime mon pays à la manière de ceux qui

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<sup>349</sup> Manson. Translation: "People have said that I'm xenophobic, when there is nothing that I detest as much, first of all because I spent all of my youth between Argentina and the United States and because I was the first to suffer from it. [...] There are too many theories concerning my little chap. Our intentions were much simpler than those that everyone assigns to us. We simply wanted to entertain our readers. [...] There is a 'Commission to censure the youth press' that is very, very severe, believe me. We carefully slipped in a few [female characters], but if we were to introduce a certain number of pretty girls in our series, other characters would very well have to react to them. And, well, there, that poses loads, really loads of problems!"

<sup>350</sup> Hauttecoeur. Translation: "Our only ambition is to make people laugh. [...] The big problem in France is that people are ashamed to laugh. So they look for excuses. It's nothing new. [...] There's a censorial Commission, as always [...]. And listen, if we didn't put women characters in earlier, right there is the proof that we aren't misogynist. All of our characters were grotesque. The girls would have to be just as ridiculous, and we love them too much to do that..."

ont vécu longtemps à l'étranger. C'est tout. [...] Notre seule ambition, c'est de faire rigoler... Les autres interprétations sont démesurées.<sup>351</sup>

Goscinny in *La Vie catholique*:

Astérix intéresse tout le monde. On voudrait le faire servir à toutes les sauces. Récemment encore, on a cherché à le transformer en je ne sais quel symbole de l'indépendance française, de la résistance aux Américains. C'est excessif."<sup>352</sup>

Goscinny in *La Semaine*:

"Les exégètes ne sont pas raisonnables. Je ne suis ni nationaliste, ni chauvin, ni xénophobe."<sup>353</sup>

Goscinny in *Le Pèlerin du XXème siècle*:

Quand vous expliquez aux gens que votre métier est de faire rire, ils ne vous croient pas. Le Français a honte de rire. Quand, pourtant, il lui arrive de rire, il se trouve désarmé, et il tient à expliquer pourquoi il rit. Il entend sauver la face. Il cherche alors des raisons graves, sérieuses, profondes. [...] Quand je lis les études profondes, farcies de psychanalyse que l'on fait sur Astérix, je ris, je ris... On en a dit des bêtises sur lui ! [...] À ce propos, on a porté toutes sortes d'accusations contre moi. On m'a dit que je présentais une version flatteuse, chauvine de nos compatriotes. On m'a traité de poujadiste. Pourquoi ? Mystère insondable. [...] Pour certains, Astérix en est venu à incarner une conception de la vie, voire une vision du monde. [...] La potion magique symboliserait l'homme providentiel, c'est-à-dire le Général. Le village gaulois, ce serait le symbole du ventre maternel. Je vous le répète : quand vous dites que votre propos, votre unique propos, est de faire rire, on ne vous croit plus !<sup>354</sup>

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<sup>351</sup> Gurgand. Translation: "These theories aren't reasonable [...]. I assure you that I am neither nationalist nor chauvinist nor xenophobic. I love my country in the manner of those who have lived a long time abroad. That's it. [...] Our only ambition is to make people laugh... The other interpretations are excessive."

<sup>352</sup> Caro. Translation: "Astérix interests everyone. People want to mold him to serve all purposes. More recently still, someone tried to transform him into I don't know which symbol of French independence, of resistance to the Americans. It's excessive."

<sup>353</sup> P.M. Translation: "The theories aren't reasonable. I am neither nationalist nor chauvinist nor xenophobic."

<sup>354</sup> Potin. Translation: "When you explain to people that your profession is to make people laugh, they don't believe you. The Frenchman is ashamed to laugh. When, however, he happens to laugh, he's suddenly disarmed, and he tries to explain why he's laughing. He tries to save face. So he looks for serious, deep reasons. [...] When I read the in-depth studies filled with psychoanalysis that people are doing on Astérix, I laugh and laugh... People have said such silly things about him! [...] On that note, people have leveled all sorts of accusations against me. People have said that I presented a flattering, chauvinist vision of our compatriots. People have treated me as a *poujadiste*. Why?"

Goscinny in *Le Cid*:

[O]n a dit de nous que nous étions gaullistes, poujadistes, de gauche. On a même écrit que nous étions du comité de soutien de Gaston Defferre. N'importe quoi.

[...] Lorsqu'on fait des études sur nous, on développe des raisonnements philosophiques extrêmement intéressants. Mais l'exégèse devient facilement méchante surtout lorsqu'on aborde les problèmes politiques, l'aspect commercial de la question, etc. [...] Ma forme d'humour me porte plutôt vers le pastiche, vers la parodie, le gag à l'état pur.<sup>355</sup>

Goscinny in *Le Monde*:

Je me considère comme un amuseur.<sup>356</sup>

Goscinny in *Le Nouvel observateur*:

Je ne suis pas *critique*, je continue à faire de la *satire*. [...] En réalité, l'humour est toujours d'opposition. Sous un gouvernement de droite, l'humour est de gauche ; sous un gouvernement de gauche, il est de droite. Personnellement, je n'ai pas d'idées politiques précises. Mon refus de l'engagement vient donc du fait que je suis un humoriste. Je crois qu'un humoriste doit rester en dehors, prendre ses distances, ne pas voir le monde en noir et en blanc et considérer tous ceux de l'autre bord comme des salauds.<sup>357</sup>

Goscinny clearly did not wish "Astérix" to be read as an homage to "l'homme providentiel," as a tribute to "l'indépendance française," as a symbol of French resistance to American hegemony, or as a nationalist or "chauvine" vision of modern French society. He could have denied all imposed interpretations without offering one of his own, yet he chose not to.

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Unfathomable mystery. [...] For others, Astérix has come to embody a conception of life, even a vision of the world. [...] The magic potion would symbolize the man sent from heaven, that is to say, the General. The Gaulish village would be the symbol of the maternal womb. I repeat: when you say that your purpose, your only purpose, is to make people laugh, people don't believe you anymore!"

<sup>355</sup> M.N., "Ni moraliste... ni critique... je suis un rigolo !" *Le Cid* 15 (1970). Translation: "People have said that we're Gaullists, *poujadistes*, leftists. People have even written that we were on Gaston Defferre's support committee. They'll say anything. [...] When people do studies on us, they develop extremely interesting philosophical arguments. But the theories easily become mean, above all when they address political problems, the commercial aspect of Astérix, etc. [...] My form of humor takes me closer to pastiche, to parody, to the gag in its pure state."

<sup>356</sup> Alexakis. Translation: "I consider myself an entertainer."

<sup>357</sup> Kaminsky. Translation: "I'm not a *critic*, I continue to do *satire*. [...] In reality, humor is always oppositional. Under a right-leaning government, humor is leftist; under a left-leaning government, it comes from the right. Personally, I don't have precise political ideas. My refusal to engage politically then comes from the fact that I'm a humorist. I believe that a humorist must stay outside, keep his distance, not see the world in black and white, and consider all of those on the other side as bastards."

Instead, he declared the series to be a satire of the average (modern) Frenchman: "Pour moi, Astérix... c'est la caricature du Français moyen..."<sup>358</sup> He had already laid the groundwork for such a myth in an earlier interview published in *Le Pèlerin*: "Les Gaulois, ce sont nos cow-boys. Leur histoire, c'est un peu notre western à nous. [...] Ensuite, les Gaulois nous ramènent à nos premières connaissances scolaires."<sup>359</sup> With just these three evocative images – of the stereotypical Frenchman, of the American frontier myth, and of the French Third Republic gradeschool history textbook – Goscinny offered his readers a framework through which his series could be easily understood and appreciated. It is interesting to note that the preliminary interpretations of the "Astérix" series presented in the key articles from the 1960s in fact reflected Goscinny's own intentions. *Rallye* described Astérix and Obélix as "deux Gaulois bien de chez nous."<sup>360</sup> *L'Express* asked, "Les Français de 1966 ne reconnaissent-ils pas, dans ces Gaulois 'irréductibles, courageux, teigneux, têtus, ripailleurs, bagarreurs et rigolards', l'image qu'ils se font d'eux-mêmes ?"<sup>361</sup> In a similar vein, *Arts et loisirs* wondered if Astérix was "le Français tel qu'on le décrit et tel qu'il s'imagine lui-même ?"<sup>362</sup> A bold subhead in *La Vie catholique* read, "Astérix a toutes nos qualités."<sup>363</sup> The article went on in frenzied tones: Astérix "est 'NOUS' tout simplement. [...] Il nous ressemble. [...] 100 % national. 100 % gaulois. 100 % celte à tête ronde. 100 % guerrier à moustaches blondes. 100 % buveur d'hydromel [...]. Oui, 100 % et même 120 % bien de chez nous, Astérix notre grand-père !"<sup>364</sup> *Echo de la mode* declared Goscinny and Uderzo's Gauls "si proches de nos contemporains qu'ils en sont enfin, pour la première fois, acceptés comme ascendants."<sup>365</sup> *La Nouvelle critique* called the series an "éloge du

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<sup>358</sup> Barraud et. al. Translation: "To me, Astérix is the caricature of the average Frenchman...."

<sup>359</sup> Potin. Translation: "The Gauls are our own cowboys. Their history is a little like our very own western. [...] And then the Gauls take us back to our first school lessons."

<sup>360</sup> Martineau. Translation: "two Gauls just like us."

<sup>361</sup> Gurgand. Translation: "Do the French of 1966 not recognize in these 'invincible, courageous, aggressive, headstrong, gluttonous, feisty, and fun-loving' Gauls the image they have of themselves?"

<sup>362</sup> Pottar. Translation: "the Frenchman as he is described or as he imagines himself?"

<sup>363</sup> Translation: "Astérix has all of our qualities."

<sup>364</sup> Caro. Translation: Astérix "is simply 'US.' [...] He resembles us. [...] 100% national. 100% Gaul. 100% Celtic with a round head. 100% warrior with a blond moustache. 100% drinker of the nectar of the gods. [...] Yes, 100% and even 120% just like us, Astérix, our grandfather!"

<sup>365</sup> Vals. Translation: "so close to our contemporaries that they have finally been, for the first time, accepted as ancestors."

stéréotype du Français.<sup>366</sup> *Le Cid* presented its hero as "un Français moyen qui vit dans une France moyenne."<sup>367</sup>

After including excerpts from interviews with the creators, many journalists then offered their own, or others', interpretations of the series' social and political relevance. Some journalists openly scoffed at Goscinny's persistence in refusing to endorse alternative readings of "Astérix." Barraud et. al. in *La Nouvelle critique* wrote: "Goscinny et Uderzo semblent ne pas être tout à fait conscients eux-mêmes des significations et des échos que l'on peut trouver dans leurs petits livres. René Goscinny prétend s'amuser des 'exégètes' des aventures d'Astérix."<sup>368</sup> Gurgand in *L'Express* more politely recounted that "Goscinny ne souhait[e] qu'on cherche ailleurs, plus profondément, d'autres raisons, d'autre 'motivation', à la ferveur que des million des Français témoignent aujourd'hui à Astérix. Et pourtant..."<sup>369</sup> At times, journalists' interview questions revealed their insistence on breaking through the creators' stoic façades to obtain confirmation of ulterior (political) motives. The interviewer in *Le Cid* took a shot at Uderzo first in person and then in print:

[L]es allusions à la vie d'aujourd'hui sont flagrantes. Et s'il ne s'agit pas de 'critique sociale', il s'agit d'allusions assez évidentes, assez précises, assez 'en situation'. Non, Uderzo considère que Goscinny et lui ont cherché toutes les situations dans lesquelles les personnages pouvaient évoluer et que celle-là en vaut une autre, et que celle-là est l'une d'entre elles.

Mais, la Zizanie... Ce titre ! tout de même ! N'y aurait-il pas une allusion à ce climat de trouble perpétuel dans lequel nous vivons depuis mai 1968 ?

– Non, assure Uderzo. On aurait pu trouver cette idée dans l'un des premiers numéros ou dans le vingt-cinquième... s'il y en a un vingt-cinquième.

N'insistons pas.<sup>370</sup>

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<sup>366</sup> Barraud et. al. Translation: "tribute to the stereotype of the Frenchman."

<sup>367</sup> M.N., "Ni moraliste... ni critique... je suis un rigolo !" *Le Cid* 15 (1970). Translation: "an average Frenchman living in middle-class France."

<sup>368</sup> Barraud et. al. Translation: "Goscinny and Uderzo seem not exactly aware themselves of the meaning and echos that one can find in their small books. René Goscinny claims to be amused by the 'exegeses' on the adventures of Astérix."

<sup>369</sup> Gurgand. Translation: "Goscinny wishes that we not search elsewhere, more deeply, for other reasons, other 'motives,' for why millions of French are so enthusiastic today about Astérix. And yet...."

<sup>370</sup> M.N. Translation: "The allusions to life today are blatant. And if it's not 'social commentary,' the allusions are pretty evident, pretty precise, pretty relevant. No, Uderzo considers that he and Goscinny looked at all situations in which their characters could evolve and that this particular one was just like any other. But la Zizanie... that title! all

Some journalists refrained from declaring single, definitive readings of the series by relaying the conclusions of experts or fans, usually in a tone of bemusement or even slight derision. Yet while pretending to discount the more "outlandish" theories, journalists nonetheless still offered readers several different ways in which "Astérix" could – and had already been – read and understood. *Arts et loisirs* claimed that "[c]ertains psychologues ont poussé plus loin l'analyse. Cette Gaule gauloise est une Gaule gaulliste. Ce pays humilié et vaincu, à la merci de voisins hostiles et méprisants, au bord de la faillite et de la ruine, c'est la France de 1958."<sup>371</sup> *La Semaine* likewise reported that "des érudits déjà s'interrogent gravement sur la philosophie d'Obélix et l'angoisse métaphysique d'Astérix."<sup>372</sup> In reference to the magic potion, *L'Express* declared that "les sociologues y voient le symbole de l'homme providentiel – de Gaulle."<sup>373</sup> *Le Nouveau candide* reported that, "pour beaucoup de lecteurs, Astérix pense à gauche : pour quelques-uns d'entre eux, c'est même un radical-socialiste, rien de moins. Pour d'autres, la chose est évidente : Astérix ne peut être que gaulliste, la potion magique devient alors la 'providence' gouvernementale, Rome se met à mâcher du chewing-gum et Obélix devient le fer de lance d'une irrésistible force de frappe."<sup>374</sup>

Other journalists, however, offered interpretations and critiques of their own. Gurgand, in his leftist newspaper, forged an explicit link between the political content in "Astérix," Charles de Gaulle, and anti-Americanism to declare the series a glorification of resistance above all: "On se contente des leçons d'histoire pour continuer la résistance. C'est dans la résistance plus que dans la conquête que se manifestent le mieux les vertus gauloises. Voilà pourquoi Astérix a conquis les Français plus facilement que César n'avait conquis la Gaule."<sup>375</sup> Lentz, writing in the Gaullist weekly *Le Nouveau candide*, connected the Romans in "Astérix" to the Americans as

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the same! Would this not serve as an allusion to the perpetually troubled climate in which we have been living since May 1968? – 'No,' maintains Uderzo. 'You'd be able to find this theme in one of the first episodes or in the twenty-fifth...if there even is a twenty-fifth.' We don't insist."

<sup>371</sup> Pottar. Translation: "certain psychologists push the analysis too far. This Gaulish Gaul is a Gaullist Gaul. This humiliated and defeated country, at the mercy of hostile and contemptuous neighbors, on the verge of failure and ruin, is the France of 1958."

<sup>372</sup> P.M. Translation: "already scholars are seriously examining the philosophy of Obélix and Astérix's metaphysical angst."

<sup>373</sup> Gurgand. Translation: "sociologists see in it the symbol of the man sent from heaven – de Gaulle."

<sup>374</sup> Lentz. Translation: "for many readers, Astérix leans towards the left; for some among them, he's even a radical socialist, nothing less. For others, it's clear: Astérix can only be Gaullist, the magic potion becomes 'salvation' by government, Rome begins to chew gum and Obélix becomes the spearhead of an unstoppable striking force."

<sup>375</sup> Gurgand. Translation: "People settle for history lessons to carry on the resistance. It's in resistance more than in conquest that Gaulish virtues are portrayed in the best light. There's why Astérix made a conquest of the French more easily than Caesar conquered Gaul."

well as to the Soviets, yet he predominantly saw the series as an allegory of life under the Vichy régime: "Les souvenirs de la dernière guerre sont gentiment ravivés : [...] il y a les 'collabos' qui s'habillent à la romaine et veulent faire de la Gaule 'une autre Rome' ; il y a les profiteurs, les trafiquants de marché noir, les traîtres, les salauds, bref, tout ce qui fait la noirceur d'une époque qui semble encore bien vivante dans l'esprit des créateurs d'Astérix."<sup>376</sup> Barraud, writing in the Communist journal *La Nouvelle critique*, credited – and criticized – the series for its nationalist message: "Ce n'est pas une idéologie de la France seule, il s'agit plutôt de l'expression nationale d'une attitude générale, universelle. [...] Astérix réécrit la *Guerre des Gaules* pour la plus grande gloire de la France éternelle. [...] L'idéologie véhiculée par les aventures d'Astérix mêle en effet des thèmes républicains et jacobins (de Gaulle, Pompidou et autres se présentent d'ailleurs volontiers comme les garants de la légitimité républicaine, de l'ordre social et de la liberté)."<sup>377</sup> The diversity of such interpretations served to fuel the controversy over the full meaning and symbolism of *le petit Gaulois*.<sup>378</sup> The more journalists claimed Astérix as an *emblème* of the left or right, the more Astérix became institutionalized as a new national myth.

## Conclusion

Institutionalization by the media facilitated, and perhaps completed, the rise in popularity of "Astérix" (the serialized comics series), *Astérix* (the albums), and Astérix (the character) during the decade of the 1960s. At the same time, Goscinny and Uderzo emerged as celebrities in their own right, known for their *série-vedette* as well as for their newfound wealth. Uderzo had treated himself to several Jaguars, *La Semaine*, *Paris-Match*, *L'Express*, *Entreprises*, and *Le Nouveau candide* happily revealed. The latter had even calculated that Goscinny and Uderzo, by 1967, had together made 125m AF from licensing fees alone: "ça fait tout de même pas mal d'argent. Si l'on ajoute à cela les droits d'auteur sur huit millions d'albums, sur le film et les

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<sup>376</sup> Lentz. Translation: "Memories of the most recent war are gently revived: [...] there are the collaborators, who dress themselves as Romans and want to turn Gaul into 'another Rome;' there are the profiteers, the racketeers on the black market, the traitors, the scum, in short, everything that made for the darkness of an era that appears still to be alive and thriving in the minds of the creators of Astérix."

<sup>377</sup> Barraud et. al. Translation: "It's not an ideology of France alone, but rather the national expression of a general, universal attitude. [...] Astérix rewrites the *Guerre des Gaules* for the greatest glory of an eternal France. [...] The ideology conveyed in the Astérix adventures in effect combines Republicanism with Jacobism (de Gaulle, Pompidou and the others appear voluntarily as the guarantors of the legitimacy of the state, of social order, and of liberty)."

<sup>378</sup> We have already seen, just in the articles studied, the amount of "writing back" that existed between journalists on both sides of the political spectrum. Goscinny, as well, made frequent reference in interviews to Gurgand's article and a later article appearing in *Le Monde* in September 1971 ("M. Pompidou épaulé Astérix"), in which Noël-Jean Bergeroux declared *Pilote* and *bande dessinée* in general inherently conservative because mass market.

reproductions à l'étranger, on en arrive à la conclusion que les heureux créateurs d'Astérix sont parés pour un bon moment."<sup>379</sup> Institutionalization of "Astérix" in the media, however, did not end by 1970, nor was *la grande presse* the only tool in transforming Astérix from a character on the page of an *illustré* into a national hero recognized as such even outside the borders of France.<sup>380</sup> Awards began to roll in for the creators by the late 1960s. Both Goscinny and Uderzo received the Prix Gaulois de l'Académie gauloise de Montélimar around 1967.<sup>381</sup> Goscinny was decorated as a chevalier des Arts et des Lettres in 1969 and was awarded the National Order of Merit in 1970. In 1978, he was posthumously awarded a César for his film work.<sup>382</sup> In 1985, the Eiffel Tower played host to an exposition on his life and work.<sup>383</sup> Schools, roads, and libraries around the world today bear his name.<sup>384</sup> In 1986, Uderzo won "le Grand Prix des Arts Graphiques au 13ème salon d'Angoulême," a late mention that felt, to him, like an afterthought.<sup>385</sup> He was also inducted into the National Order of the Legion of Honor in 1989 and named commandeur des Arts et des Lettres in 2003, although memorialization of his life and work has proceeded more slowly since he not only remains alive and well but is still publishing "Astérix" albums that he writes and illustrates all on his own. Yet during the 1960s, as we have shown, the media indeed played a constitutive role in turning Goscinny and Uderzo into celebrities, "Astérix" into a "phénomène social," and *bande dessinée* into a legitimate cultural form. In an interview granted many years later, Uderzo humorously summed up the secret to Astérix's success:

Je l'ai toujours dit, *Astérix*, la série et le phénomène, c'est ce qu'on appelle l'auberge espagnole : on y trouve ce qu'on veut bien y trouver. Ce qui ouvre évidemment très larges toutes les portes possibles, tels ces exégètes qui tiennent absolument à y découvrir des choses que les auteurs n'ont pas voulu montrer, car les auteurs sont un peu ignorants de ce qu'ils font, c'est bien connu [...].<sup>386</sup>

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<sup>379</sup> Lentz. Translation: "all in all, that's not a small amount of money. If we add to that the copyright fees from 8m albums, the film and foreign reproductions, we arrive at the conclusion that the happy creators of Astérix are sitting pretty for the moment."

<sup>380</sup> Astérix and Obélix were featured on the cover of *Time Magazine's* July 15, 1991, issue.

<sup>381</sup> Duchêne 134.

<sup>382</sup> Guillot et. al. 234.

<sup>383</sup> Ory Goscinny 258.

<sup>384</sup> Ory Goscinny 263.

<sup>385</sup> Lanoë 16; see also Sadoul et. al.

<sup>386</sup> Sadoul et. al. 150. Translation: "As I've always said, Astérix, both the series and the phenomenon, is what we call an *auberge espagnole*: people see what they want to see in it, something that obviously invites all sorts of

## V. CONCLUSION: EXPLAINING POPULARITY

### The Production of Popularity

Despite Goscinny's claim that the rise in popularity of the "Astérix" series during the first half of the 1960s occurred suddenly and mysteriously, he, indeed, was very much aware of the roles played by *Pilote*, Dargaud, radio, television, and the national print media in the establishment of Astérix as a "phenomenon." His May 1967 address to the Rotary Club in Paris revealed as much. With typical self-deprecation and bonhomie, Goscinny recounted, in chronological order, the events that had transformed "Astérix" into a fixture of French popular culture by the mid-1960s. On the balcony of Uderzo's apartment that hot August afternoon, he told the Rotarians, he and Uderzo had decided to set their story in ancient Gaul and to base their characters on Vercingétorix, "souvenir des premières leçons d'histoire de notre enfance,"<sup>387</sup> because of the comic potential such a setting – "un sujet plein de possibilités"<sup>388</sup> – promised. Once "Astérix" appeared in *Pilote*, the reception by the magazine's readers became "un assez vif succès," only to be outdone two years later by the series' crossover into album format.<sup>389</sup> The turning point, according to Goscinny, came in the summer of 1965, when

plusieurs journaux réputés sérieux commencent à s'intéresser à notre petit Gaulois ; les vitrines des librairies se tapissent d'albums des aventures d'Astérix, les gens commencent à parler de lui et, ce qui est plus étrange encore, se mettent à parler comme lui [...]. La presse, la radio, et la télévision ont beaucoup fait pour le succès d'Astérix, inutile de vous dire que nous leur en sommes reconnaissants.<sup>390</sup>

Adults and children alike snatched up the albums. At book-signings, in particular, Goscinny and Uderzo witnessed first-hand the "évolution" of *bande dessinée* from format for children to legitimate literary/art form. In the early years, adults uninterested in the books or the events chaperoned their enthusiastic adolescent children. Within six years, however, the authors perceived a marked reversal: "maintenant, nous recevons la visite d'une grande majorité

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speculation, such as theories claiming definitively to discover in Astérix things that even the authors didn't want to show, because it's well-known that authors are somewhat clueless about what it is they do...."

<sup>387</sup> Guillot et. al. 208. Translation: "memory of our first history lessons as children."

<sup>388</sup> Guillot et. al. 208. Translation: "a subject full of potential."

<sup>389</sup> Guillot et. al. 208. Translation: "a rather quick success."

<sup>390</sup> Guillot et. al. 208. Translation: "many reputable newspapers started to become interested in our little Gaul; bookstores wallpapered their display windows in Astérix albums, people started to talk about him, and, stranger still, started to talk like him [...]. Press, radio, and television have done a lot for the success of Astérix [...] it goes without saying that we're grateful to them."

d'adultes, non accompagnés. Certains nous disent pudiquement : 'Vous savez, je l'achète pour mon petit garçon, mais moi, je le lis aussi' [...]."<sup>391</sup>

As was his custom, Goscinny took advantage of his platform at the Rotary Club to deny allegations and accusations that he, or the series, had any underlying political agenda. "Des chercheurs éminents,"<sup>392</sup> he recounted, while mostly praising the series in the national press, interpreted it and the intentions of its authors variously and contradictorily, which seemed to render single and conclusive interpretations impossible:

"Astérix ? Mais c'est de Gaulle !" disent les uns. "Goscinny ? disent les autres, un homme de gauche, il défend le monde du travail contre le patronat, il n'est pas d'accord quand on fouette les esclaves égyptiens !" "Goscinny est poujadiste", écrivent certains avec le calme que donne la certitude. "Il est d'extrême droite, crient les uns. Il est chauvin et nationaliste !" "Astérix fait un clin d'œil aux Américains en écrivant que les Gaulois ont cessé d'être aimables avec les touristes", s'inquiètent les autres.<sup>393</sup>

He even humorously poked fun at his own evasive tactics when questioned by persistent journalists interested in his political views:

[Interviewer:] "Vous faites de la politique dans *Astérix*." — "Non, lui ai-je répondu, je fais le guignol pour amuser les enfants et pour ceux qui ont le désir de le rester longtemps." — Pas de faux-fuyants, vous faites de la politique ! D'ailleurs quelles sont vos idées politiques ?" — "Lisez *Astérix* !" lui ai-je dit [...].<sup>394</sup>

To prove that *Astérix* could serve just as easily as an emblem of the political left as the right, Goscinny pointed out that his *petit Gaulois* had been appropriated by neo-Nazis in Germany and a Swiss separatist party, and that politicians in France of all persuasions had sought permission to

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<sup>391</sup> Guillot et. al. 211. Translation: "now, we're visited by a great majority of adults coming alone. Certain among them are careful to tell us: 'You know, I'm buying this for my little boy, but I also read it' [...]."

<sup>392</sup> Guillot et. al. 208. Translation: "Noted scholars."

<sup>393</sup> Guillot et. al. 208. Translation: "'Astérix? He's de Gaulle!' some say. 'Goscinny?' say others, 'a man of the left; he defends the working world against management; he doesn't rest easy when they whip the Egyptian slaves!' 'Goscinny is *poujadiste*,' write others with a calm born of certainty. 'He's from the extreme right,' cry others. 'He's chauvinistic and nationalistic!' 'Astérix gives a nod to the Americans by writing that the Gauls have stopped being nice to tourists,' worry others."

<sup>394</sup> Guillot et. al. 209. Translation: "[Interviewer:] 'You engage in politics in *Astérix*.' — 'No,' I responded to him, 'I make a fool of myself to entertain kids and those who wish to remain so for a while.' — 'You're not going to get off that easy; you engage in politics! For that matter, what are your political convictions?' — 'Read *Astérix*!' I told him [...]"

use the BD hero in their political campaigns. Goscinny and Uderzo had always been careful to respond: "tous les candidats ou aucun."<sup>395</sup>

Goscinny went on to discuss the academic interest in the series, concluding, with typical tongue-in-cheek humor, that he mostly had no idea "de quoi il s'agissait:" "Je crains de ne pas être assez instruit pour comprendre tout ce que j'écris."<sup>396</sup> As for the "phenomenon" itself, the naming of the satellite, the introduction of "Astérix" into the classroom, and the common practice – as he had observed it – of naming pets after the characters in the series seemed to him to encapsulate the *engouement* of the public for all things Astérix by the middle of the 1960s. The "suprême consécration," however, he stated with mock seriousness, was the appearance of Astérix within the clues of the daily crosswords.

In his final remarks, we see Goscinny once again fall back on language exonerating himself from the responsibility of having to serve as an intellectual in the public sphere. By vindicating himself of all motives save the wish to entertain, he again delivered a consistent message and crafted an unequivocal portrait of himself and Uderzo as "unengaged" creators/celebrities with mass appeal. "[N]otre seule ambition," he claimed in the final line of his speech, "reste celle du début : amuser quelques instants nos lecteurs."<sup>397</sup>

We may here conclude that the dramatic rise in popularity of "Astérix," *Astérix*, and Astérix during the first half of the 1960s was due to many factors, both intrinsic and external to the series' subject matter, narrative mechanisms, and graphic style. We have demonstrated how the French *bande dessinée* market was ready for a humorous, French-themed comics series targeting adolescents and adults by the end of the 1950s. With American and Belgian domination of *bande dessinée* on the wane due to the turn towards "100 % français" production in many areas of life, *Pilote* and "Astérix," both original French products targeting a French audience and addressing contemporary French concerns, were poised to become hits with a new, wider reading public. In addition, the rigors of the law of 1949, to which *Pilote* faithfully conformed, and the oversaturation of the thriller, non-humorous adventure, and crime comics series in France gave *Pilote* a leg up over its competition. The magazine's large, glossy format and emphasis on educational content and community-building efforts ensured its longevity, despite a rocky first

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<sup>395</sup> Guillot et. al. 210. Translation: "all the candidates or none."

<sup>396</sup> Guillot et. al. 210. Translation: "what it's all about;" "I fear I'm not educated enough to understand everything that I write."

<sup>397</sup> Guillot et. al. 211. Translation: "Our single ambition has remained unchanged from the beginning: to entertain our readers, if only for a moment."

year, as well as provided "Astérix" with a sturdy launching pad for its rise in popularity. Radio exposure, as we have seen, proved a crucial component to the early success of the magazine and of its star series and contributed to the success of the first "Astérix" adventures in album format. The breadth of Radio-Luxembourg's marketing and advertising schemes promoting "Astérix" to millions of French weekly and then daily listeners helps explain how the first "Astérix" album sold quickly without any accompanying promotional activities by the publisher Dargaud. By 1965, media coverage of the series and of the authors established "Astérix," Goscinny, Uderzo, and even *bande dessinée* more generally as legitimate cultural objects worthy of recognition. Within the pages of the press, Astérix, in fact, emerged as a national emblem whose significance was worth debating in the fiercest of political tones and the most serious of arenas. Goscinny's and Uderzo's repeated denials of overt political intentions only fanned the flames of the debate by leaving – perhaps deliberately – the meaning of Astérix open to any and all, thus ensuring a continued engagement with their characters that translated directly into commercial success and enduring popularity.

### **Popularity v. Appeal**

While we must concede that no amount of deliberate exposure can successfully sell a product that does not resonate in some way with the public for which it was intended, we can nevertheless, after having examined "Astérix," make the case that market conditions, branding, marketing, advertising, and media consecration greatly facilitated the series' rise in popularity among the mainstream French literate public during the early 1960s by shaping how readers accessed "Astérix," how frequently, and in what ways, the public was exposed to "Astérix," and how readers interpreted "Astérix." As Peterson aptly noted, (popular) cultural artifacts do not spring forth, ready-made, from nothing; rather, they are influenced by historical, political, economic, legal, and cultural conditions and events; crafted over time by multiple parties working in concert or in discord; and appropriated and thus transformed to serve diverse purposes by many in the public and private spheres.

As a closing argument, this paper will use the rise of "Astérix" during the 1960s as a case study to reiterate more generally that content analysis, or statements of appeal, cannot alone always adequately account for popularity. Appeal, for our purposes here, refers to those elements within the cultural product itself that facilitate its resonance with intended, or targeted, and even

unintended audiences. The "Astérix" series' appeal in the 1960s may have included its narrative structure, the abundance of puns, its parodies of modern life, the frequent appearances on the page by contemporary cultural icons, the illustration and lettering styles, the presence of anachronisms, the interdependency of text and image, the proliferation of European national stereotypes, and the like. Although reader letters from *Pilote* and published reviews of "Astérix" in the national press have given us an indication of which elements resonated with French readers during the 1960s, in-depth quantitative and qualitative analysis of reader response carried out on a scale not possible within the scope of this paper would confirm and flesh out the preliminary findings presented here.

Popularity, on the other hand, simply signals the state or circumstance of being well-known. The study of popularity, then, requires us to look holistically at the entire industry surrounding the production of "Astérix," of which reception is only one part. Investigating popularity then becomes a project of identifying both constraining factors, which in this case include law, technology, professional and market organization, and even cultural climate, as well as those deliberate, calculated efforts aimed at increasing public exposure to "Astérix" to raise public awareness of the series, its heroes, and its creators with the specific aim of fostering affection, or brand loyalty. Only by evaluating the popularity of the series through a production-of-culture lens can we perceive the interdependent relationships that existed between creation, publication, branding, and the market and recognize their influence on the rising visibility and prominence of "Astérix," *Astérix*, and Astérix in the popular imagination during the 1960s.

### **Multiple Readers, Multiple Readings**

Astérix, indeed, was a flexible property, receptive to multiple interpretations, as we have witnessed in the perspectives published in the national print press. Yet how might we explain the proliferation of readings and meanings without resorting to discussions of the series' appeal, as others have done before? As a final reflection on the intersection of appeal and popularity, we will propose ways for thinking about how readers read and create meaning, especially in the realm of *bande dessinée*, by drawing from the valuable contributions of those in the not uncomplementary fields of literature, comics theory, and cognitive sociology.

Little does it matter if Goscinny and Uderzo simply wished to entertain. Authors and artists can never guarantee or even predict how their works will be read, nor can they put an end

to the production, and publication, of meanings that seem to disregard avowed authorial intention. As Michel Butor once argued, authors never "finish" their creative works; readers do, by "reconstituting" meaning during the reading process itself. As readers read, they inevitably superimpose their own values and beliefs onto characters and situations, thus imbuing the text (and images) with personal – cultural – significance.<sup>398</sup> In the field of comics, such a concept acquires exceptional poignancy. *Bande dessinée* as a literary format not only invites but *requires* imagination on the part of the reader to populate the white spaces between frames, or gutters, with outcomes and meanings that complete, or close, the narrative sequences. The symbolic abstraction of both text and image in comics necessitates that the reader interpret often iconic, abstruse, or sparse representations, which in turn implicates him or her in the story-making process itself. Comics theorist Scott McCloud argues that "every act committed to paper by the comics artist is aided and abetted by a silent accomplice – an equal partner in crime known as the reader."<sup>399</sup> The reader's "deliberate, voluntary closure is comics' primary means of simulating time and motion," or of advancing the plot.<sup>400</sup> In addition, the more abstract the image, and the less explained through text, the easier it becomes for the reader to insert her- or himself directly into the story. Reading requires participation, which leads directly to subjective creation and identification. In other words, once we engage on this level with the characters and situations depicted, it becomes possible to pick and choose among the symbolic "tools" offered on the page to craft meanings that resonate with our knowledge and our personal experiences.

While *how* we read comics relies on the framing of text and image within panels, the placement of panels in relation to each other on the page, the size of the panels, and the white space in between them, *what* we read depends greatly on our personal world views, or our "mental frames." According to cognitive sociologist Eviatar Zerubavel, what we see, fail to see, ignore, discard, and invest with significance, while reading or in life in general, depends greatly on our socially constructed, culturally specific "mental horizons."<sup>401</sup> Such schemata tell us where to look, what to sense, how to label and classify, what to focus on or "attend" to, what to deem relevant, and even what to "close" our minds to.<sup>402</sup> In comics, the deliberate cropping of

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<sup>398</sup> Michel Butor, *La critique et l'invention* (Paris: Editions de Minuit, 1968) 18.

<sup>399</sup> Scott McCloud, *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (New York: HarperPerennial, 1994) 68.

<sup>400</sup> McCloud 69.

<sup>401</sup> Eviatar Zerubavel, *Social Mindscales: An Invitation to Cognitive Sociology* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1997) 36.

<sup>402</sup> Zerubavel 40.

illustrated scenes into a series of unconnected panels forces upon us as we read a delimited, manipulated field of vision – a frame – through which we must make sense of the action. To construct meaning, we draw on the beliefs we acquired from friends and family, the values we learned in school, the codes and norms we abide by, and our knowledge of the rituals and practices of our communities. Framing, then, in both senses of the word – the framing of text and image on the page, and the processes of mental framing we inadvertently apply while reading – becomes a possible key to understanding how "Astérix" was able to elicit diverse, contradictory, impassioned reactions among readers in France during the 1960s.

In the words of Michael Schudson, culture "serves a variety of purposes because symbols are 'polysemic' and can be variously interpreted; because communication is inherently ambiguous and people will read into messages what they please; [...and] because meaning is at the service of individual interest."<sup>403</sup> In our study of the "phenomenon" surrounding "Astérix" in the 1960s, we have seen factors both external and inherent to the text itself influence and even determine how readers accessed the series, how they received it, how they used it for their own (political) purposes, and how they explained it to others. From the letters to the editor published in *Pilote*, we discovered that "Astérix" did, indeed, resonate with readers of all ages and become a focal point of reader interest by the mid-1960s. In our summary of the marketing and advertising empires deliberately constructed to promote the series, we saw how radio exposure and merchandising helped garner the series a vast and mainstream audience, which in turn proved largely responsible for the early success of the *Astérix* albums. By the mid-1960s, Astérix as a symbol was indeed polysemic and variously interpreted, as we discovered in the feature-length articles written by "professional" readers serving as opinion-makers in the public sphere. In studying the Astérix "phenomenon" through a production-of-culture lens, we have uncovered factors essential to the series' rise in popularity – factors such as format, accessibility, marketing, advertising, branding, and media institutionalization – that many have overlooked in the past and that might prove useful in understanding the rise in popularity of cultural artifacts more generally. Yet in France, "Astérix" indeed represents an interesting, if not singular, case in recent publishing history in which commercial interests aligned simultaneously with both intellectual interests and popular fascination. The resulting *folie* for all things Astérix, even more surprisingly still, has only grown stronger over the years.

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<sup>403</sup> Schudson 155.

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